Bleter Zikhroynes- Pages of Memoirs

First Volume:

Tsvishn Eygene un Fremde- Amongst Family and Strangers

See: Bleṭer zikhroyneṡ | Yiddish Book Center

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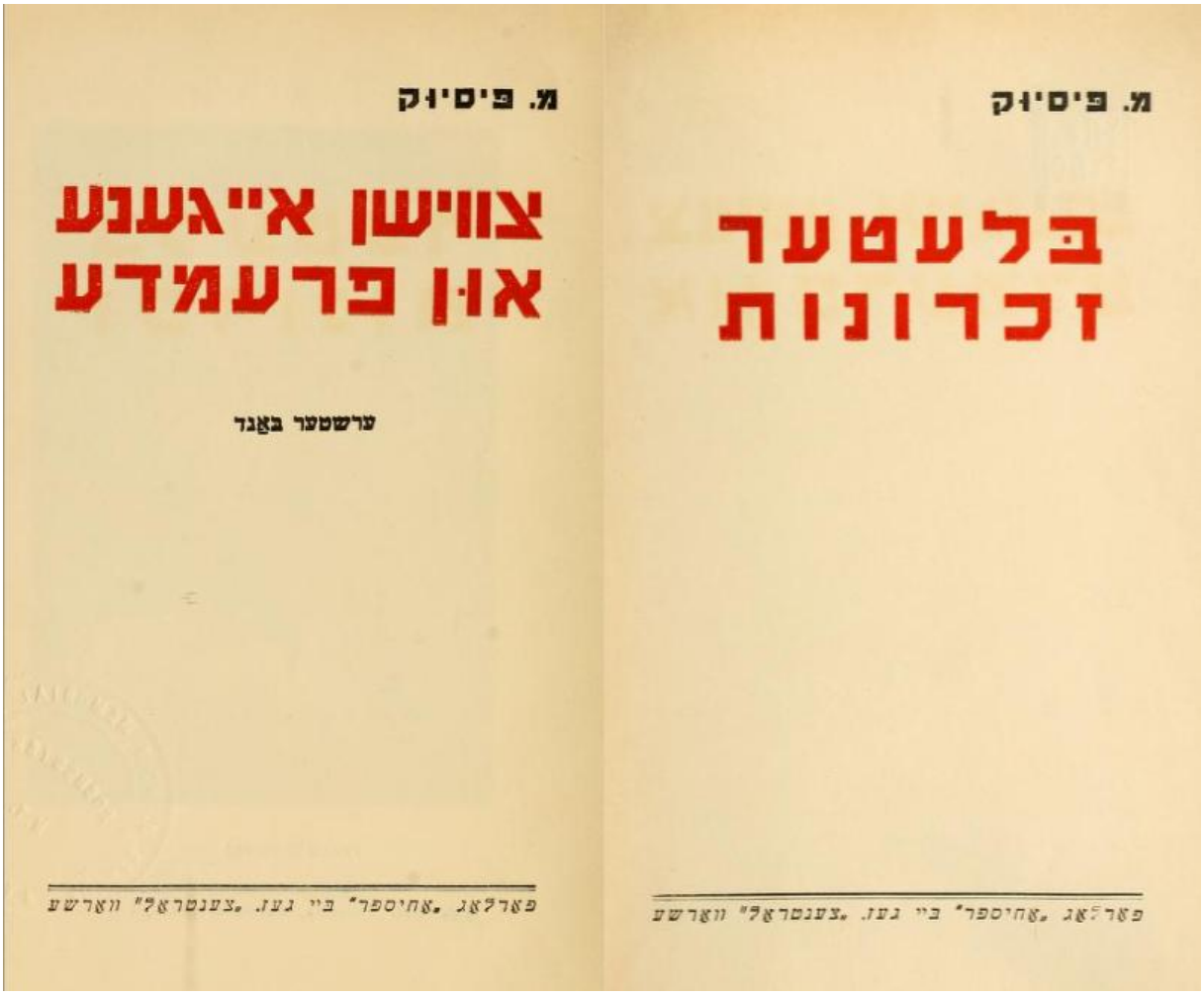
BLETER ZIKHROYNES

Meir Pisiuk



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M. Pisiuk

Dedicated to

My wife

Shulamit

The one who walks hand in hand with me for most of my life-

As a loyal comrade and friend

Translator's Foreword

Lyubtsh, mid-19th century.

Born into a devout, respected Lithuanian Jewish family with a bright future, Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk's life takes a drastic turn with the early loss of his father. Orphaned by the Tsarist regime, he endures poverty, hunger, and exploitation.

Despite these hardships, Pisiuk's thirst for knowledge drives him to study hard, including at the prestigious Ramayles Yeshivah in Vilna, where he engages in both religious and secular studies influenced by the Haskalah movement. The author recounts how he and other students, thirsty for knowledge, absorbed subjects - even beyond the rabbinical canon - under the most impoverished of conditions.

We see the young Pisiuk struggling with his destiny, torn between the desire to study and the poverty that forces him to take any job, be it as a teacher or a carver, or any of the other jobs that require hard drudgery but pay little.

The biography provides rich insights into Jewish life in prominent Eastern European centers such as Vilna, Grodno, and Novogrodok.
Recognized as a scholar and prayer leader, Pisiuk's aspirations to be ordained as a rabbi are thwarted by a devastating fire in Grodno.

He then took on various roles to support his family before leaving for America in search of better opportunities. Pisiuk's American experience mirrors the hardships faced by many Eastern European migrants.

Under family pressure, he eventually returns to Lithuania and re-enters the beer business, achieving financial stability. He remains introspective, however, realizing that material success can never replace his deep connection and love for knowledge, books, and especially Jewish spirituality and literature.

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As always, I would like to thank my friend Dr. Susan Kingsley Pasquariella for once again taking on the role of project coordinator.

For those interested in other contemporary Białystok, Krynki and Ciechanowiec biographies, I recommend my translations of

"My Childhood Years in the Pyaskes" by Leybl Hindes

"Memoirs of a Woman from Bialystok" by Rachel Kositza

"To the Great World" by Chayele Grober

"Krynki in Ruins“ by Abraham Soyfer

"Destruction of Białystok“ by Srolke Kot

"As It Happened Yesterday" by Yosl Cohen

"A Shtetl in Poland" by Isaac Bloom

"Memoirs And Writings Of A Białystoker", part 1, by Jacob Jerusalimski

"Life And Death In The Bialystoker Ghetto“, by D. Klementinowski

My translations of the mentioned books can be downloaded for free at JewishGen - The Home of Jewish Genealogy and Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu (jewishBiałystok.pl). Some are also available as printed books.

Translator's notes:

Contents in [ ] are mine. Contents in ( ) are by the author.

The transliteration of Yiddish and Hebrew-rooted Yiddish words *mostly follows the YIVO standard or the Yiddish-Ashkenazi pronunciation.*

The title "Rabbi" and "Reb" *are both referred to by the author with the same abbreviation, "R' ". I have adopted this in my translation accordingly.*

I have corrected minor, obvious spelling mistakes *in print in my translation, mostly without comment.*

Instead of a Preface

When I wrote my memoirs, I had no literary ambitions whatsoever. I imagined my children, grandchildren, friends and acquaintances. I imagined that I was telling them about my life and they were listening to me, or rather: I was listening to myself as I told them...

I had completely forgotten about the readers.
But when a book is finished and you "put it out on the street," the reader also appears before your eyes. He comes along, cold and distant, hiding behind his figure my nearest and dearest, for whom I have written my memoirs.

But I don't want to make any demands on him, the reader, as is usually the case in prefaces. Why should I do so? He is in a better position than I am:
If he wants to, he will read my book. If he doesn't want to, he'll put it down (or throw it away!), and I can't blame him in the least.

The only thing I can say to him on this occasion is that, although memoirs are essentially always vivid echoes of personal life, I have tried to be sincere.
Of course, more sincere than impartial.
The latter is very difficult to achieve, especially since I wrote most of my memoirs during the reign of the Bolsheviks, from whom I had to hide in great fear in a quiet, secluded cottage on the outskirts of the city.

However, I feel that if I am a little too "hotheaded" and partisan anywhere in the pages of my "Zikhroynes," my sincerity will eradicate that flaw.

M.P.

Chapter I

The panoramic picture.- The shtetl.- My father.- My grandmother.- Where my family name comes from.- Both commerce and Torah.- Lack of Jewish knowledge and scholarship.- The bote - medroshim.- How one once learned.- My father and his partner.- The idyll.- The gardeners.- The blissful silence.

...When the part of my life that I have experienced so far passes before my eyes, this part of life with all its adventures and events, with all its ups and downs, sufferings and joys, sadness and celebrations, despair and hope, consolation and pain, when all this passes before my eyes like a broad, fluttering panorama, it stops at childhood, at my first breath.
And so I would like to begin with childhood.

I was born in the small Lithuanian shtetl of Lyubtsh [Lubtch, Lubcza], Novogrodker [Nowogródek, Nawahradak, Belarus] Voivodeship, to a pious, middle-class Jewish family.

My father's name was Avrom-Moyshe [Abraham-Moshe], but in the shtetl he was called Abraham-Moshe Shmuel-Pesie's. My grandmother was known to be an efficient Jewess,

a woman of character who could encompass an entire era with her name [Pesie]. In time, Pesie became Pisiuk - the surname of our entire family.

My father was a "lamdn" [Jewish scholar] and a merchant. In the winter he traded flax and seeds, and in the summer he leased vegetable gardens and orchards. For him, trade and Torah were intertwined, they belonged together. He had time for God, time for himself, and time for people. At first glance, however, he had more time for God than for anything else.

My father was doubtless an interesting personality. A tall man with a blond beard and long forelocks, he brought joy and comfort wherever he went, as was customary in those days. It was pleasant to spend time with him and to listen to his words from the Torah.

The whole shtetl of Lyubtsh at that time was a shtetl of "lamdonim" [Jewish scholars] and "muflogim" [outstanding personalities]. The merchant, the shopkeeper, the craftsman and even the carter could usually study. People were terribly ashamed of their lack of Jewish knowledge. "Lamdn" - the term was a seal of quality, a high diploma, a kind of intellectual certificate that inspired great reverence and respect in the shtetl.

The small shtetl of Lyubtsh gave the Jewish world such rabbis and sages as Rabbi Elikum of Grodno and Rabbi Shmuel Lyubtsher, the rabbi of Vilna [Vilnius], as well as Rabbi Sheftl Dayan [religious judge] and others.

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Among the educated world, it is worth mentioning the famous Petersburg families "Bakst" [Baksht] and "Margolin", who also came from our shtetl.
The shtetl had two large brick bote-medroshim [houses of study and prayer] and a large "shul" [synagogue], and I am not exaggerating in the least when I say that these three large, beautiful buildings would have been a wonder and a jewel even for a large city.

When I remember my innocent childhood years, the two bote-medroshim come to mind, which were filled with Jews day and night, like a beehive with bees.

Who wasn't there? And who hasn't spent most of his life there?
In the bote-medroshim, people studied day and night. They sat over the large Talmudic folios [Gemara], rocking with perseverance, frowning, and twiddling their thumbs in Talmudic disputes. And with a sharp and even sharper Litvishn [1] mind, one penetrated deeper and deeper and fathomed the eternal secrets, opinions and conclusions of the Talmud.
Forgetting wife, child, and livelihood in the big, gray, mundane world, one flew enthusiastically into the clouds, into the sky, into the delightful and fascinating light of the Talmud.

The bote-medroshim also served as a kind of club where the people of the city could discuss public needs, news, mainly Jewish news, wars, politics, diplomats, kings, decrees, [many] worries - and only a little comfort.

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Everything that happened in the outside world was reflected in the bes-hamedresh [house of study and prayer]. Opinions were exchanged, every matter was considered and clarified, and every event in the world was measured and weighed in relation to the Jewish community.

However, there were also students who weren't interested in the outside world at all. They never turned their heads away from the Gemara, their eyes never leaving the small letters of the Gemara. These Jews went to the bes-hamedresh as if it were a house of eternity, which they rarely left.

My father had a partner called R‘ Kalman Nyesvizher. They both leased gardens in the shtetl or in the neighbourhood.
On summer nights, they themselves were the guardians of their gardens. And since both were Jewish scholars who knew the Mishnah and the Gemara by heart, the summer nights were filled with the sweet melody of the Gemara.

No one disturbed them. The shtetl slept, the surrounding forests and fields lay solidified. There was a deep silence, and only the high, wide sky with its millions of stars listened to the intimate Gemara melody of these guardians of the garden.

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Only now do I understand what those two Jews felt, sensed and experienced on those quiet, starry summer nights, as they hummed the millennia-old chant into the night between the small, motherly fruit trees, in the cool scent of apples, with a piece of Tosafot [Talmudic commentary] on their lips.

This is an idyll that is hard to imagine in today's world.
in today's life, which is filled with wild turmoil and noise, with haste and hurry, with telephones, cars, radio and aeroplanes, so that man no longer knows blessed silence and has lost the way to himself.

The people of the past did in fact know this mysterious and profound path to themselves, because man resonated more to himself than the world to him [2] . He heard *himself* more than the world.
The people had fared well. Their sphere of interest was small, but God alone was at its center. A great, warm light shone from him down upon the Jew of that time, who had a purpose and a goal in life. He felt God in all his ways and paths, and his poverty did not frighten him.

Trembling before the world outside, before the evil ruler, before the Russian constable, before the rural policeman, before the chief police commissioner, as indeed before all who bore any sign

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of this government, the Jew, however, remained calm within himself, in his soul and in covenant with God.

He carried within him the supreme ruler of the world.
And so the two fine Jews, my father and his partner, could become the night guardians of their own gardens.
Where else can you learn better than in silence and at night?
And they combined their two functions - guarding and learning - and devoted themselves to silence and night. They filled the air with Judaism, with Jewish fire.

This is how a bourgeois Jew once leased a garden...

[1] Litvish= Lithuanian. Lithuanian Jews, also called "Litvaks“ often had the reputation of being particularly rationalistic and skeptical, in addition to their excellent Talmudic scholarship. The term is also commonly used as a synonym for opponents of the Chasids, the Misnagdim. In fact, there were heated arguments and even hostile clashes between the two groups.

[2] Original: "Di fartsaytike mentshn hobn yo gevust dem dozikn geheymnisfuln un tifn veg tsu zikh, vayl der mentsh hot mer geklungen far zikh aleyn, vi di velt far im“.
I have given this sentence in the original because of its depth of meaning. I would like to point out that the Yiddish language very often uses the word "aleyn" [alone=all one] instead of "self".

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Chapter II

The fire in the shtetl. - My grandfather Shmuel-Pesie's and his “iron fortune”. - My father becomes a wealthy person. – R‘ Kalmen Nyesvizher travels to Eretz-Israel. - The cheder and the road. - The belt. - Beatings and whippings.

Once a terrible fire broke out in the shtetl. On a Friday, right at "kaboles-shabes" [the nightly gathering to welcome the Shabbat], a fire broke out in a house. All the people were in the bote-medroshim [study houses], praying fervently.
Suddenly cries were heard:
"Help, there's a fire, come to the rescue!"
"Where is the fire?"
"Who is burning?"
"Help, there's a fire!"
Everyone ran headlong out of the bote-medroshim. There was a real panic. Thick smoke, like autumn mist, rolled through the streets of the shtetl. Sparks flew in the air like red stars.

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The burning wood cracked and the fire leapt from house to house, from roof to roof, from wall to wall.
Women were screaming, shrieking, their cries echoing in the air, children were crying and getting in each other's way, and the men didn't know what to do. They were confused and wrung their hands.

They dragged bundles away from the houses, saving pillows and blankets. The sparks of the fire mixed with the feathers of the duvets.
But the fire was stronger than people, their efforts and endeavors. It swept through the shtetl like a flood and in a few hours had consumed all the wood in the houses and huts.

That Friday evening, almost the entire Lyubtsh shtetl was left without shelter. People lay homeless on the few rags they had managed to save from the fire, sobbing and crying, moaning and weeping. The shtetl had lost everything in the fire.

The only one who had some luck was my grandfather, Shmuel Pesie. He was an original Jew; small and crooked-footed, but very busy and lively. He traded like most of the Jews in the shtetl.
However, he was stingy by nature, trembling for every penny and adhering to the principle that money is a good article, a strength, and that it is better to accumulate more and more of it than to spend it.

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"You have to guard the penny," he used to say. And he did guard it like the apple of his eye. Of the little capital he had, he invested some in his business, some in interest-bearing loans, and some in savings.

A book of laments for Tisha b'Av served him, lehavdil [no comparison intended], as an iron fortune [reserve]. He used to put his banknotes in the book and tie two strings around them.

And on the night of the fire, when the whole shtetl was left naked and destitute, my grandfather Shmuel Pesie's walked among the victims of the fire like a millionaire among the have-nots.

During the fire, he saved his "iron reserve", the lament book, and there were three hundred dollars in it!

I think it was only then that he really understood the power of money.

My grandfather didn't live much longer after that. He died a year after the fire, when he was in his seventies.

Before he died, he called my father and gave him a few thousand rubles, along with the promissory notes from his creditors.
My father was the only heir. And what my grandfather left him was a huge fortune for those years.

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My father suddenly felt like a wealthy Jewish man...

At that time he dismissed R‘ Kalmen Nyesvizher from the partnership because, as I said, he was a Jewish scholar and a good Jew in general. In fact, he soon travelled to Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel], and the Jews of the shtetl accompanied him on foot for several kilometres, wishing him all the blessings of the world.
The admiration for him was so great that people signed donations for him to be sent to Eretz Israel, so that he could spend his last years in peace.

R‘ Kalmen Nyesvizher arrived safely in Eretz Israel, and after a short time he began to export from there the well-known article which at first sight could not exactly gladden the sinful heart of man.
I am referring to the small bags of soil from Israel which are placed under the head of a corpse and which he, R‘ Kalmen Nyesvizher, sent from there to Lyubtsh...

By the way, he also began to send more cheerful things from Jerusalem, such as ear shells, tablecloths and other designs. In this way, R‘ Kalmen became a mediator and expediter between the ancient Holy Land of our ancestors and the dear little Lithuanian shtetl of Lyubtsh, where my eyes first saw the light of day.

My father invested his inherited fortune in interest-bearing investments and founded a yeshivah [Talmud school] for young boys from wealthier middle-class families. In this yeshivah he studied Talmud and "poskim" [commentaries] with the students.

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At the age of five, I also began learning in the cheder. In the course of two years I had already fathomed the Torah, the "neviim" [prophets] and "ketuvim" [writings], and at the age of seven I began to learn the Gemara.
To this day I don't understand why they started with me, with everything, with the "Kiddushin" ["Betrothal", a tractate of the Mishnah], and even with the second "peyrek" [chapter]. And why was it only the incomprehensible verse of "ha'ish mekadesh" [1] and so on that had to fall on my innocent ears?

I mean, my rabbi, who was even a great scholar, had no concept of life.

To him, everyone was apparently the same, whether they were big or small. And since you were learning Gemara, what difference did it make whether you learned this or that [part of the] Gemara, the main thing was that you could learn, thank God, and strengthen the Jewish heart.

By the way, my rabbi's strange pedagogical viewpoint did not harm me at all. I was a gifted boy with a very good grasp of things. I had a very sharp memory, and what got into my head stayed there.
However, I must admit that I also had a great weakness: I didn't have much stamina for learning...

Sometimes it seemed to me that I preferred the lively street with its free, light-filled air to the dark cheder with the heavy problems of Gemara. Sometimes I would even sneak out instead of sitting in the cheder.

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And there I preferred to play with children than to burden my head with 'toysfes' [Talmudic commentators].
Oh, it's so good to play with children; the body moves, the feet jump, the eyes shine, and the young heart beats so sweetly!

But what was good for me was a sin for my father. He loved me very much, but he found it hard to accept that I would swap the cheder for the street and the Gemara for playing with the naughty boys.

And when his admonitions didn't help, he would sometimes beat me severely, regardless of his love, and twist my ears so that I saw sparks flying in front of my eyes.

"You have to learn, a boy has to want to learn," he would say during the punishment, looking at me angrily.
What can you say to that? He was right. But no one will deny that I was right, too. What could I do but be drawn to the bright outdoors, to the open sky that knew no bounds, and to the rascals who were the best boys in the world?

I remember once I went to my friend's house to play. And I liked my friend's leather belt so much. I took the belt home and kept playing with it. A belt is a good thing for a boy to have. Suddenly my father asked me:

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"Where did you get that belt?"
I blushed a little, but answered firmly:
"Found it...found it on the street."
"Found it?"
"Well, yes, found it."
Dad didn't hesitate long, took the belt, put me in the chair and beat my bottom pretty hard. While he was spanking me, I heard him ask me:
"Do you know the meaning of 'לֹא תִגְנֹב' [Lo tignov]? You know the meaning, don't you, you lout?"
And when I got up from the chair with a clearly burning part of my body, my father said a little more calmly:
"Lo tignov [Thou shalt not steal] also means that one must not 'find' anything...you understand, you lout, one must not 'find' anything!"
And so, with great pain and shame, I had to carry the belt back to my friend.

[1] האיש מקדש = "A man may contract a premininary marriage either in person or through an agent, and a woman may be taken in preliminary marriage either in person or through an agent[…]", see Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin 2:1:1 with Connections.

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Chapter III

My father's sisters. - A stuttering teacher and a cantor without a voice. - My Aunt Pesie - Happy have-nots. - My grandmother Khane. - Cholent charity. - My older brother - "Esn teg". - A job as a tutor in the village. - A hot crush. - Jacob Dinezon's novels. - A little philosophy of love. - My father's khalemoyd [chol hamoed] and his agmes-nefesh [suffering]. - Jews in peasant furs. - My father's gift. - Love had triumphed.

My father had four sisters. One was married to a rabbi, the other to R' Nosn Mordekhay the likhtmakher [Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker].
This R' Nathan-Mordechai was one of those unusual Jews of that time who are not to be found today. He was a decidedly over-pious person. Tall and with large eyebrows like brushes, he used to stand at the long "Shmone-Esre" [Shemoneh Esrei, Amidah], not swaying back and forth like all Jews, but swaying to the right and left.
At night he was busy with his candles and with grease for the farmers, and he slept very little.

For forty years he spoke the "Mishnayes" [the six portions of the Mishnah] for the community, praying and learning.

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At the age of sixty, he left his small factory and all his possessions to his children and went alone to Radin [Radun] to the Chofetz Chaim [1] .
There he sat over the Torah and his holy work for another 15 years, and actually died while sitting over the Gemara.
He was characterized by a rare perseverance and an even rarer asceticism.
This man had not seen the world, nor did he want to see it.
He sacrificed everything he had to the Torah and to the "oybershtn" [the Lord].
He literally emptied himself completely for them.

The third sister married a teacher who was even a good scholar, although he stuttered. Unfortunately, he couldn't get the words he wanted to say off his tongue. Wow, how does a stutterer become a teacher of children? Well, the main thing is that it remains a question only for us, for today's generation, but that was not the case in those years. As it was, he moved his tongue and earned his living with it.

The fourth sister was also married to a teacher who also taught children. He taught only the smallest children, little fawns. He also worked a little as a cantor. But he had a hoarse voice, so of course he was paid very little for his singing. But he had to keep quiet, because if he didn't, he would be angrily reprimanded:
"And that hoarse, pitiful voice? You won't get very far with it...".
So he was content to be paid at all.

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However, my Aunt Pesie, as we called her, was a hard-working Jewess.
Tall, sturdy, and energetic, she worked diligently half the day as a landlady in her house and the other half twisting ropes from hemp. But these three incomes, their salary as teacher, cantor, and rope weaver, were barely enough for bread and potatoes.
And yet my Aunt Pesie's house was a happy place. You could always hear a good joke, happy laughter, and a good melody of prayer. Poverty was ignored. They were good, kind, happy have-nots.

My mother was from a good family. Her father was a grain merchant, a wealthy bourgeois Jew who led a generous life.
He traded in Vilna and Memel [Klaipėda], taking his cargoes of grain across the Neman River, which ran through our shtetl. His beautiful house was also a charity house.
Miracles are told about Grandma Khane. She was a rare good woman and had warm, charitable hands.
It is said that on Fridays, when the have-nots of the shtetl put their cholent meals in Grandma's oven [to keep warm], there was a great commotion in the kitchen all Friday. But before the big pots of cholent went into the oven, Grandma would look into each pot and rummage through it, pot by pot.

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And where the liquid in the pot looked meager and very poor, Grandma would generously enrich it. She would add fat to one pot, meat to another, sausage to a third, and so on, and the next Shabbat morning, when the poor women picked up the cholent and everyone sat down at the Shabbat table, they felt happy and refreshed by the unexpected treasure they had found in the pot.

My older brother, Yitskhok Volf, was a very gifted boy in his youth. He was very diligent in his studies. And when he wanted to improve his studies in a larger "place of Torah", he went to Vilna and entered the "Esther-Sore's-Kloyz" [a small hall for study and prayer], where he devoted himself body and soul to his studies.

He studied and, like all "kloyznikes" in those years, went to "esn teg" [2] , which he eventually got tired of, so that his perseverance in learning cooled down.
He began to think about "takhles“ [3] , about a different way of life, about earning money... Someone told him that he should "aroysforn oyf konditsye" [travel around and accept a condition/position, mostly as a tutor], as they say today. In those days it was expressed more simply: "*knelung*" or "*melamdes*". By accepting a position he would gain strength and his own money.

It was suggested that he go to a village Jew, a certain Velvl Mayuker, who lived in a village not far from Vilna.

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The deal was made. My brother went to the village, where he began teaching the children of the village Jew for 25 rubles a semester.
I can imagine the wonderful change my brother must have felt after being transferred from the cramped, stuffy "kloyz" with the meager meals to the open village among the fields and forests.

But that was not all. The village Jew also had a little daughter, and a beautiful one at that... My brother didn't even read novels, and poems about love never reached his ears. The sweet development of a novel was completely unknown to him.

But my brother was young and healthy, and that can cover all novels and all love poems; he saw the village Jew's girl and immediately fell in love with her. What did he feel? He felt his heart tremble sweetly...
But it was not easy in those years. You weren't even allowed to look at a virgin. The word "love" was an unkosher word. And the feeling of love was a feeling of sin...

My brother certainly struggled with his feelings, but in the end he won. Even then, love could not be suppressed, although Jacob Dinenzon, the author of the old naive novel, saw things differently. With his works, he practically laid a tombstone to all the love of the Jews of that time.

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But there were also very strong loves that didn't end tragically.
As for my brother, he didn't suffer for long. The matter came to the table, as they say, and the two of them became lovers. And it didn't smell of tragedy at all. The father-in-law, a simple man from the village, even wanted the wedding to take place immediately.

Suddenly, one fine morning, my father received a letter saying that he should apologize [for the inconvenience], but that he should go to the wedding of his son, the first-born....
My father was even a little confused at first. What did it mean that his son was going to get married and spend his whole life with people who were completely unknown to him, his father?
In the end, he came to terms with the fact that this was surely a gift from the Most High, and he calmed down.

He hired a couple of horses, packed the satin Shabbat caftan, put on a big fur coat (it was the month of Shevat, when the frost burned like fire), and set out.

On the way, my father imagined all sorts of things, such as that the bride's father, though a village Jew, would be a man who could certainly show off a beautiful piece of noble tradition, so that it would shine in every corner. He would surely come from a high lineage, from beautiful rabbis, sages and "tsadikem" [righteous people], who would all come to the wedding.

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They would all come in beautiful satin caftans, with the most expensive "shtreymelekh" [Chassidic fur hats] on their heads, and with great white beards, so that the earth would tremble with reverence.
All the while, my father naively dreamed of meeting these great righteous men and sages, and even trembled a little, wondering if, God forbid, they might overshadow him with their tradition.

And he also unconsciously thought of great wealth, of a large dowry that his son would receive at his wedding, so that he would immediately find his way in life and become a handsome landlord with respectable people around him.

As he sat on the wagon in the burning frost of Shevat, wrapped in his heavy fur coat, my father let his imagination wander, thinking about everything in detail and imagining everything from the good, bright side.
And so he was content and happy with his son, with the family of the bride's father, and with the whole world.

But how surprised and confused he was when he got out of the carriage, half frozen, and entered the bride's father's house in his heavy coat. It was as if he had fallen from a bright palace into a dark cellar.

Where were the rabbis, the tsadikem, the sages? And what kind of house was it? And what kind of bride's father was that man? He was a simple Jew, with a simple appearance, dressed in a simple peasant's fur coat. He saw at once that this was a wretched, uneducated man.

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And the Jews sitting around the house also looked like very uneducated people, coarse fellows with limited intellect. They also wore peasant furs, just like the bride's father, and it was just a shame and a disgrace to talk to them.

My father was completely embarrassed. He quickly had a talk with his son and learned that the dowry wasn't worth a penny either. There was no dowry at all. His first-born son had simply been taken, his head turned, and a marriage to a virgin, albeit a beautiful virgin, had been brought about by deception. But she was good for nothing, without tradition, without greatness, without money, without anything.

My father was beside himself. He had lost his temper and ordered the horses to be harnessed. He would go back to Lyubsh, so that his eyes would no longer see this.
And to his son, the bridegroom of whom we are about to hear, he said:
"What use is this bargain to you? This is no match for you! Leave this matter alone before it is too late."

But the bridegroom told him firmly:
"Father, she is my bride, and I will marry her!"

It was a bitter moment: the son stuck to his decision, and his father was about to leave. He was disgusted with all the people in the house.

Fortunately, in that peasant house with the peasant furs, there was someone who, although not a saint, was able to influence the father.

26

It was a distinguished citizen of Vilna, R‘ Leyb Segal, who had also come to the wedding. This person was there to decorate and embellish the wedding, and although he did not embody the importance and grandeur of a saint, he did embody the splendor of the great world and wealth.
He interfered and would not let my father go.
Of all the arguments he used to convince my father, perhaps this was the strongest:

"The matter, R‘ Abraham-Moshe, is Heaven-given, and one must not rebel against what comes from those places. You must accept it as good and right..."

When he was already on his way, this argument came back to my father's mind, and he gave in and allowed a relationship with these poor people walking around in peasant furs...

So a real Jewish wedding was celebrated "with mazl," and it was happy.

Before he left, my father said to the young "balebesl" [head of the family]:

"Listen, Yitskhok-Velvl, I'm leaving now, so I'd like to leave you a gift as a memento. But what shall I give you? Money you'll spend, a valuable object can be lost... so I'd rather give you a good piece of "Rashi" [4]... That is, I'd like to interpret for you a piece of "Rashi" from the "Gemara Bava Metzia" that many great scholars have puzzled over for generations.

27

But they didn't make it...
I also agonized over it, racked my brains for a long time, and soon went crazy, until I grasped the true meaning of the text..."

My father smiled.
And his son asked him:
"What meaning is that?"

Our father pointed to the piece of "Rashi" and gave his son [his interpretation as] an extraordinary gift. Dad went home, happy that he no longer had to see those people in their peasant furs.
But my brother was also happy that he had finally become attached, body and soul, to the girl he had fallen in love with (in the old days they used to say "farkokht" or "farlaypet").

So love had finally triumphed.

*

[1] Rabbi and Talmudist Israel Meir HaKohen [Kagan], [1839-1933], popularly known as the Chofetz Chaim, founded a yeshivah in Radun, named after him. He wrote a religious book on Jewish ethics and the laws of speech, the Sefer Chofetz Chaim.

[2] "Esn teg"= "eating days", refers to the community custom, once widespread in Eastern Europe, of supporting teachers and education by hosting [yeshivah] students for meals in private homes on certain days of the week, with stays probably changing from day to day.

[3] תכלית , takhles: definite sense, practical aim, purpose, result, serious business, here also: job, earning a living, making something out of oneself.

[4] This abbreviation stands for the most famous Bible and Talmud commentator of the 11th century.

28

Chapter IV

My father's illness. – R‘ Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker becomes a guardian.- An argument with the rabbi - and one cannot apologize. - The former position of a rabbi in Lyubtsh. - The parade at the election of the new rabbi. - My father's opinion on the value of a beautiful sermon. - The exams of rabbis. – R‘ Shmuel Lyubtsher. – R‘ Yechiel-Michel Halevi Epstein. - How he was smuggled out of Lyubtsh. - Novogrodok is stronger than Lyubtsh. – My father’s death. – I begin with "esn teg".- Bad times are coming.

A year after my brother's wedding in the village, my father fell ill. He was in bed for six weeks and his illness was life-threatening. He himself realized that he was in a critical condition.
He had not been living well with my mother, so before he died he called his brother-in-law, Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, to come and see him. He gave him guardianship of his property and children. His mind was in no way impaired.

The respected citizens of the shtetl often paid him visits.

29

Some recited verses from the Torah with him, and in the meantime people forgot that they were dealing with a seriously ill person.

But the Lyubtsher rabbi, R‘ Hirsh Tiktin, did not come to visit him. The two of them had fallen out over an incident during their studies. Father had asked him a difficult question, and the rabbi had not answered it well. As a result, they had a heated discussion and got into a quarrel.

And on the Friday when my father was dying, many honorable citizens tried very hard to persuade him to reconcile with the rabbi. They wanted to bring peace, which is so important at such a time. However, they proceeded very cautiously.
They asked him:
"Perhaps you, R‘ Abraham-Moshe, will agree that the rabbi should come here? First of all, you yourself know very well that it is a great mitzvah to visit a sick person, and secondly, it is a great cure for physical illness to reconcile with one's enemy... But here we are not talking about an enemy at all, G-d forbid, but about two beautiful, good Jews who have quarreled over a matter of Torah.
One should be reconciled, R‘ Abraham-Moshe..."

My father, who was terminally ill, listened attentively and spoke the following words:
"You see, it is the eve of Shabbat...I mean, I am going home on Shabbat...my time is short...and t h e r e I will surely be asked about my deeds in this world. ---

30

But what did I say about the rabbi? Did I say that, G-d forbid, he is not an honest Jew? I only said that he is not such a scholar that he is worthy to be a rabbi in Lyubtsh... So what do I get out of it? He is welcome to come here now, but I will repeat my position to him again...and I will stand [trial] for my words right t h e r e, where one must do so...".

My father closed his eyes in weakness and could hardly breathe.

It should be noted that the status of a rabbi in Lyubtsh was very high in those days. Novogrodok and Lyubtsh - these two Jewish shtetls boasted of their rabbis. Novogrodok had such brilliant rabbis as R‘ Borekh-Mordekhai [Baruch-Mordechai] Lifshits and R‘ Yitskhok Elchonon [Yitzchak Elchanan], and Lyubtsh was illuminated by such rabbinical scholars as R‘ Abraham-David and R‘ Tsvi-Nokhem [Tzvi Nachum] of Slavaute [Slavita?].

In Lyubtsh, people were proud of a beautiful rabbi and a great Jewish scholar. More than that, people really breathed with him. He was the spiritual king of the shtetl and its environs. People adorned themselves with him and talked about him all the time.

No wonder, then, that the question of the rabbi's position was once the most important issue in the life of the shtetl. No other matter stirred up and shook Lyubtsh as much as the election of a new rabbi. In those days there was a storm in every small hut, in every household, a thousand times stronger and more intense than the election of a parliament today.

31

A number of "tsadikem" [righteous people] positioned themselves and fought each other to the death with great bitterness.
When R‘ Nokhem-Tsvi died, a new rabbi had to be chosen. The whole of Lyubtsh was boiling like a cauldron. Rabbis came from various towns, large and small.

Each one of them was very impressed by the prestige of the rabbinate of Lyubtsh.
And each one of them preached an elaborate sermon in order to please the Lyubtsh audience even more.
However, the people always rejected them [the candidates] with wrinkled noses. Above all, they faltered when the audience tested them on a page of Gemara...

My father used to say in such cases:
"What good are their beautiful sermons to me, they should rather present their genius to me with a page of Gemara..."

All the rabbis who came were rejected, and everyone agreed that R‘ Shmuel Lyubtsher, who was then "moyre-hoyroe" [judge and rabbi] in Vilna, should be brought. At that time, his stamp was impeccable and secure, and it took some effort to get him to Lyubtsh.

The whole shtetl walked about five kilometers to meet him. And when the rabbi arrived with the carters, the people unharnessed the horses from the wagon.

32

But he [the rabbi] committed himself to their location, and so he was led into the shtetl with great fanfare and pomp. The people were really beside themselves with joy, and after the enthusiasm, the rejoicing and the joy, it was almost as if the Jews had crowned a king...

To the great chagrin and heartbreak of the Jews of Lyubtsh, R‘ Shmuel was the rabbi of Lyubtsh for no more than three months. His family, accustomed to living in a city as large as Vilna, could not adjust to small Lyubtsh with the gray, tiny interests of a shtetl. And so the rabbi gave in to his family and left for Vilna.

Thus began another uproar in the shtetl. And again, rabbis appeared in the small alleys of the shtetl with trial sermons...

But most of them failed.

The last to present was a young rabbi, a tall and pale man. He preached two sermons and immediately enchanted everyone with his style and beautiful thoughts.
My father, however, energetically intervened and cooled the excited audience with didactic words.
"What good are these beautiful sermons, he'd better show us his genius with a page of Gemara..."

The young man felt offended.

33

Nevertheless, he went to the table and began to recite a page of Gemara with such perspicacity, brilliance and depth that the entire audience around him stood still, frozen, open-mouthed and staring.

That same day, the young man was appointed rabbi of Lyubtsh, and joy and happiness reigned in the shtetl. Once again, a king was crowned.

This young man was actually no more and no less than the famous genius R‘Yechiel-Michel Halevi Epshtein, the author of "ערוך השלחן" [Aruch HaShulchan, "Set Table", the most important collection of halachic principles].

But this time, too, Lyubtsh was not allowed to be really happy about the new rabbi.

This rabbi, who had so enchanted the people of the shtetl, ruled the shtetl for only a few days. One Wednesday morning, as the people were rushing to pray in the bes-medresh, they suddenly heard that the rabbi, the great "tsadik" [righteous person] and genius, had fled...

And indeed, the details of why and when and under what circumstances the Rabbi had fled were told immediately afterwards...
The story was as follows:
Novogrodok, the neighboring town of Lyubtsh, was very jealous of the new rabbi.

The citizens of Novogrodok were really running around headless, especially because the town was without a rabbi since R‘ Yitskhok Elchonon, the great tsadik, the "Amud Ha'Esh" [Pillar of Fire], had left Novogrodok after a short time and gone to Kovno [Kaunas].
Darkness and disaster reigned in Novogrodok.

34

"Staytsh [how come?]," the citizens discussed among themselves, deeply offended, "is it even a plan that Lyubtsh, this small border town, should get such a great genius and tsadik as a rabbi, and we, the citizens of Novogrodk, the true experts of a great rabbi, should swallow it?"

"No, he won't be a rabbi in Lyubtsh!" cried other citizens.
"But what can we do about it?" asked a naive Jew from the side.
"We'll do something!" a few citizens nodded conspiratorially, their old-style beards shaking.
"Everything will be fine".

And so it was. During the night, some carters secretly drove their horse-drawn wagon from Novogrodok to Lyubtsh, woke the young rabbi from his sleep, put him in the wagon without asking questions or answering them, and abducted him by force to Novogrodok, where the city's elite was already waiting for him.

The tiny Lyubtsher earth shook and trembled with the uproar and the screams. But nothing could be done. Novogrodok was stronger than Lyubtsh, and the tall, pale young man, the author of the Aruch HaShulchan, who was robbed and kidnapped in the middle of the night, sat on the throne of the rabbi of Novogrodok for more than forty years...

After this great misfortune, which befell the Lyubtsher community with its new rabbi, it accepted as its rabbi the aforementioned R‘ Hirsh Tiktin, who himself was a very quiet, pious and honest man.

35

But my father and other citizens of the shtetl felt that he was not capable enough to learn and teach religious texts for the rabbinate in Lyubtsh, and if he couldn't do that, it was really a question of whether he should be allowed to hold the rabbinate at all...

And my father did not really reconcile with the rabbi.

My father very formally canceled and prepared for his long journey.
That day R‘ Zalmen Shrayber came to visit him and asked him, as usual:
"Well, how are you, R‘ Abraham-Moshe?"
My father replied quite firmly:
"אנכי הולך בדרך כל הארץ" [I am about to go the way of all the world]...[1] .

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Since a doctor or healer was not called to a patient as often as today, the members of the household who wanted to replace the healer thought that the sick person had surely already breathed his last. They lit a candle and sobbed.

Meanwhile, my father woke up. He saw the lighted candle and shouted angrily:
"What, can't you wait?"
The candle was immediately extinguished and one felt "nisht ahin, nisht aher" [in limbo].

My father was breathing heavily and after about an hour he was dead.

36

The funeral took place the same day, and in the evening we prayed with a minyen [quorum of ten men]. At that time, I had the honor of saying the first "Orphan Kaddish." I was sobbing so much that the words were jumping around on my tongue and I couldn't finish the Kaddish.

Even then, I had something of a premonition, and my young heart told me that a difficult, dark life was ahead of me. My mother was a weak woman, and she certainly didn't have the strength to raise her young children as she should have.
And the guardian, R' Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, was a very busy Jew, absorbed in his studies and prayers all day and in his candles at night...

What can such a Jew give us, and what can we expect from him?

And indeed, the great worries began immediately.

First my uncle, that is, my guardian, R' Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, took me away from my good teacher and put me in a yeshivah, and since we were always worried about every penny and foresaw that my mother, with her weak strength, would not be able to feed her family, an "esn teg" was organized for me early on with relatives, as was appropriate for an orphan.

For two days I had to eat with the guardian, R' Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, one day with Uncle Khatskl, who was even a rich Jew and ran big businesses, and one day with Aunt Pesie, the "shtrikdreyerin" [rope twister].

37

She was very poor, but cheerful. For two days I ate with my grandfather, my mother's father. In this respect, our house [and its household], which had stood so firmly during my father's lifetime, fell apart.

The money my father had owned he had lent at interest to the beautiful Jews of the shtetl, and now no one paid back a penny. They all led my mother, the widow, into bankruptcy.
I crawled to the "esn teg" [eating days] sometimes to this table, sometimes to that, and the "teg" [days] ate me more than I ate them.

Dark, insulting times began for an orphan. I felt it with every step I took...

[1] Bible quote from 1 Kings 2:2, the words of King David when he felt near dying

*

38

Chapter V

The yeshivah. – A glow of Haskalah.- R‘ Zalmen of Bobruisk. – I am considered a good student. – My father’s house. – R‘ Meir the cantor. – His style of singing. – An event with a preacher that caused an uproar in the whole shtetl.- My first tefillin. – My older brother.– My trip to Vilna. – The childish despair. – I pledge my tefillin. – Fear of death. – My sister-in-law.- A free and full life.

My first yeshivah [Talmud school], which our guardian, R‘ Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, had given me so that I wouldn't have to pay tuition, must be mentioned positively. Apart from the fact that the shtetl was far from the center and from a railroad connection, a glow of Haskalah fell on our yeshivah life.
The Talmud students wanted to study secular subjects and, as the saying goes, "enjoy the tree of knowledge".
However, this also meant danger to life, persecution and expulsion.

39

But people persevered and were happy to accept anything as long as they could incorporate something from the secular Haskalah.
Gradually, the whole subject of Haskalah was legalized. The pronounced willingness and urge to learn on the part of the Talmud students overcame the fanaticism of the yeshivah leaders. It will sound almost unbelievable when I say that the yeshivah hired a teacher to teach the Talmud students Russian, arithmetic and geography. This teacher was requested from Bobruisk, and his name was indeed R' Zalmen the shrayber [scribe]. I mentioned him in the previous chapter.
He was a tall, stern Jew with a snow-white beard.

His teachings were unusually harsh and strict. For the slightest sin, he would crack his whip over the student's “lyadon” [hand] and order him to stand in the corner. I believe that he was the same Bobruisker Zalmen the shrayber, who is also mentioned in Dr. Katsenelson’s memoirs ("Buki Ben Yogli"), and who had advised him as a young boy to enter the rabbinical school in Zhytomyr.

By the way, I was not older than ten at that time, but I was accepted to the higher class of the yeshivah and was considered one of the better students.

I remember that once a boy from a village was given to the yeshivah, a boy of greatness and rare abilities.

40

His father had asked the head of the yeshivah to find a well-behaved and good student for the boy as a friend in the yeshivah. The head of the yeshivah thought about it for a while and finally chose me to be the boy's friend.

I studied in that yeshivah for three years. During that time my mother married a bookseller from Nyesvizh. She moved to Nyesvizh, while I stayed in Lyubtsh and studied in the yeshivah, practicing "esn teg" and leading the life of an orphan.

My father's house was rented to R' Meir, the Lyubtsher cantor. The house consisted of two light rooms, a dark room with a kitchen, and a small chamber. I lived in this chamber. Next to the house was a large barn where my grandfather stored grain. Every corner there reminded me of a link in an established life that had been senselessly broken.

The cantor, R' Meir, was a tall Jew with a hoarse voice. However, he considered himself a great singer and an accomplished composer.
When he led the congregation in prayer with his trained choirboys, he used to put the thumb of his right hand in the roof of his mouth and begin to sing "coloraturas" in his hoarse voice.

By the way, he had the reputation of being a good melody writer,
his version of "בראש-השנה-יכתבו" [On Rosh Hashanah it is written...] or the "ועל ידי עבדך" [And through your servant...] or other compositions had great success and were sung by cantors from the surrounding small towns.

41

He had a pretty good life. The cantor paid thirty-five rubles a year for his apartment. But my guardian used to take away my rent money and give me only pennies for what he called "small expenses".

The cantor was a very hospitable man. His house was open to every guest, to every traveler and wanderer. Whoever came by, he would welcome a Jewish scholar as well as a beautiful Jew with the greatest respect.
I remember once witnessing a strange episode with an itinerant preacher who came around the time of the month of Elul [August-September] and exhorted people to repent.

The preacher was an excellent speaker and completely captivated his audience with several sermons. Lyubsh was completely enthralled by him. One Sunday evening the cantor, R' Meir, invited him to dinner. The preacher didn't take long to show up. R' Meir made him sit at the head of the table and they helped themselves to the food.

In the middle of the meal, a messenger arrived from a village. The cantor had to leave immediately for a rich wedding in the village. He asked his wife to see that the preacher had food and drink and to treat him with great respect.

A piece of cake with such a preacher!

The cantor had a beautiful stepdaughter, a young woman whose husband was in Berditshev [Berdychiv].

42

At the table the preacher asked the cantor's wife about her daughter, and the cantor's wife answered with a regretful tone:
"She is like a young tree...she lives here and her husband has been in Berdychiv for a year and a half".

The preacher ate and shook his head:
"So, actually in Berdychiv..."
Dinner dragged on. It was getting late.

And the preacher said to the cantor's wife:
"You know, it's hard for me to go to the station. Would it be possible for me to spend the night with you? It would just be a small thing."
The cantor's wife nodded her head in a friendly way: "Well, so be it. A guest will always find a place to sleep in a Jewish home, especially a guest as distinguished as you. With God's help, you will spend the night with us!"

A bed was prepared for him in the dark room, and the young woman and the child went into the light-filled bedroom. After an hour they were all asleep, snoring their stuffy noses in the thick darkness.

I was awakened in the night by a rustling sound. I opened my eyes. Outside, the morning dawned gray and sleepy. In the gray light, the young woman was squirming, agitated, confused, as if she had a toothache.

43

"What happened?" I asked, startled.
The young woman began to whisper and her eyes filled with tears. "The preacher, the pious man, the wise man, the moralist, that will do him no good! He didn't let me sleep all night, he was after me. Do you understand? What a dog can do...with his eyes open...you really shouldn't let people into an honest Jewish house..."

She had forgotten that she was pouring her heart out to a twelve year old boy. She cried it all out in silence, her eyes never ceasing to water her complaints with tears.

The preacher, who had enchanted the shtetl with his fiery, pious speeches, had actually left at dusk, not even taking the money for his sermons with him.
There was great excitement in the shtetl about this event, and people even wanted to hunt him down and kill him, but it was too late. The preacher had slipped out of the shtetl like a shadow, and no one had noticed him.

The shtetl women were a little ashamed, the young people smiled, the older Jews sighed: "These are wonderful times! You are not even allowed to let a Jewish preacher stay in a Jewish house anymore!..."

For my Bar Mitzvah, my guardian, Nathan-Mordechai, the candle maker, bought me new tefillin and told me that from now on I had to be a "mensch", above all - a good Jew. There was even a small celebration, and I gave my bar mitzvah drasha [speech].

44

People congratulated me and I thanked them and wished them well, but even then I was strongly influenced by the pragmatic consideration that I had to change my life. I should leave the narrow Lyubtsh that I had grown fond of, and go out into the wide world, where you could either become a great student or a great earner. You couldn't achieve either in Lyubtsh.

It was then that I heard good news about my elder brother. It was said that he had saved some money and had become a full-fledged owner of a Lithuanian inn. I was drawn to the wide world, far away from my shtetl, just as my brother had once been. I slept badly that night because of all my restless thoughts.

And then it happened: one fine summer day I met the shtetl carter, who was constantly transporting goods and passengers to and from Vilna.
I told him that I was going to Vilna, and we talked about the price.

"Well," the carter said, "you can give me 60 kopecks and you'll go to Vilna."
But I didn't have a penny with me. I was walking around with empty pockets. Nevertheless, I had the courage to tell the carter that I would give him 60 kopecks for the trip.

"Well, that's all right, the deal's done," said the carter.

45

I took a small bag, put in my new tefillin and a piece of bread, and tiptoed back to the carter. No one knew the secret, my secret, that I was leaving Lyubtsh, the shtetl of my mother and father, where my cradle stood. I didn't say goodbye to anyone.

We set off happily for Vina. That trip is still fresh in my memory, as if it were yesterday.
It was a very difficult trip, nothing for my young years and nothing for my boyish strength.

The wagoner was driving an overloaded wagon. He was carrying barrels, crates, sacks and packages. On all of them were dozens of passengers, mostly women, in uncomfortable positions, either sitting, half reclining, three-quarters standing, or completely wedged between the luggage. They were constantly moaning or screaming, often clutching their hands, legs, or sides, and hunched over during the ride, looking as if their lives were about to end.

The thin mares did not have the strength to pull the overloaded wagon through the heavy Lithuanian sand. So they stopped for a while, snorted with their nostrils, breathed heavily, trembled all over, and were at the end of their tether. The wagoner, on the other hand, kept whirling his whip in the air, shouting loudly, screaming and cursing with all kinds of curses and imprecations.

46

And he murderously beat the wretched mares who couldn't pull the cart. So we trudged along in the heat and rain, cramped and anxious, between mean men and sweating, moaning women who always made faces as if this were the end of their lives.
By the way, I usually trudged along on foot, hungry, miserable and sad, without a penny in my pocket.

The real suffering began in Vilna. Being the foolish boy that I was, it never occurred to me in Lyubtsh that I wouldn't find the 60 kopecks I needed to pay the carter on a street in Vilna. As in other cities, there was no money on the streets of Vilna, but I still had to pay the carter.

A woman named „Freydke the Bal-Akhzanyete“ [innkeeper], took pity on me and lent me 75 kopecks for a holy pledge: My new tefillin, which I gave her with trembling hands, while I saw before my eyes the angry face of my guardian, Nathan-Mordechai the candle maker, shaking his head and shouting in anger:
"What are you doing, you rascal? Is this what I bought you the tefillin for?"

Nevertheless, after paying the wagoner, I breathed a sigh of relief.

47

He had never let me out of his sight for a single moment and had followed me around like a bandit.

The "Lyubtsher boy" began to look around the big, noisy city with great curiosity.
That very day I ran to the railway station: I wanted to see the train that people in our shtetl were talking about, one miracle after another. I wanted to see how it worked, how long, heavy carriages that looked like houses moved all by themselves, without horses...

But as I approached the station, I suddenly met a wild, loud, huge, stern person with a brass hat on his head and a long sword at his side.

I found out later that he was the station constable. In those days, gendarmes wore brass "kaskes" [helmets].

I was very afraid of him. My heart started beating like a hammer. I thought he had been looking for me for a long time and would put me in chains and arrest me on the spot.

I tried to escape and arrived at the inn more dead than alive.

The next day, however, I met my dear brother in R' Leyb Segal's liquor cellar. This R' Leyb Segal was the handsome, wealthy person who had decorated and ennobled my brother's wedding.

Needless to say, how I rejoiced with my brother, oh, and how my brother rejoiced with me!

48

Miserable, poor and helpless as I was, I now saw him as my savior, my redeemer.
We kissed hot and deep and drank a toast to life in R' Leyb Segal's cellar. Then we went to a restaurant in Vilna and had a sumptuous lunch, with a rich soup and meat dumplings, so that my poor stomach was so upset with joy...

Later, my good brother also redeemed my tefillin with Freydke the innkeeper, and I became a free man, without worries or debts.
But my brother said:
"Why do you want to stay in Vilna? It makes no sense!"
"But I want to study," I said.
"It is hard to study in a big city today with empty hands and an empty stomach. It takes a lot of energy!"
"But I don't want to go back to Lyubtsh," I said.
My brother thought for a while and said:
"Well, never mind. Then go to my house in Kene [Kena] and study there. You can study anywhere if you want..."

It was obviously Heaven-sent that I should go to my brother in Kene and not stay in Vilna - that great city of Torah and good deeds.

49

Soon, after a hearty lunch, we went out into the street and met a farmer from Kene who had come to Vilna with a wagon full of wood. He had sold the wood and was preparing to return home.

My brother stopped him.
"Tomasz," he said, "you're going home, why don't you take my brother with you?"
The farmer asked:
"How much will you give me for the ride?"
"Twenty kopecks."
"Well, let him go," said the farmer, "I'll take him with me!"

My brother told me to get into the cart.
"I have some work to do in town," he said, "I have to stay there. But I'll be home soon. Have a good trip!"

We said goodbye. The farmer whipped the horse, the wheels began to clatter over the stones of the pavement, and the unfamiliar streets of Vilna passed before my eyes, from which I could not take my curious gaze.

I had just arrived with so many hopes, and already I was leaving. I felt a little sorry.

Meanwhile, a cold, annoying drizzle had begun to fall, but it was getting heavier by the minute. And when we drove out into a field, it was already pouring from the summer sky like a bucket.

50

The cold, lashing water drenched and soaked me to the last thread of my shirt. I sat unprotected and awkwardly on the farmer's cart as if in a lake. There wasn't even a sack or straw mat to cover me.

The horse trotted step by step, splashing its hooves in the wet clay, and the farmer sat in the cart, stiff as a stone.
In those days a man, even a clever man, was frugal almost to the point of madness. The train ride to Kene, to my brother's house, cost 40 kopecks. At the peasant's it cost twenty.
But my brother wanted to save money, so I had to travel four miles in a downpour through sticky mud. And I counted the lame steps of the farmer's mare with childish impatience and sadness...

Now and then I would ask the stiff, drenched shoulder of the gentile:
"Yeshtsho dalyeko do keni?" [Is there still a long way to go?]
But the shoulder was too lazy to answer. It remained silent in the downpour.

The horse kneaded the clay of the path and every minute seemed like an hour, a day like an eternity. It seemed to me that I had been riding like this since I was born and would ride like this all my life.

51

And again I asked the stiff shoulder:
"Yeshtsho dalyeko do keni?"
But the shoulder remained silent, and the cold rain hit my face, my neck, crawled under my shirt, under my arm, into my lap, and I felt as if I, too, were beginning to freeze, just like the farmer's shoulder.

"Yeshtsho dalyeko do keni?"
Like a serious illness, I endured the four completely rainy miles and fell like a flowing gray stream into my sister-in-law's house. The water poured from my ears, from my hair, from my eyes, from my sleeves, from my shoes...

When she saw this torrent of water, my sister-in-law immediately grabbed me and put me on the big stove, which was still very hot. I fell like a stone and was asleep until the next morning.

When I got up early in the morning, I saw an inn full of drunken peasants. But the drinking had not stopped, it was still going on...

There was an old, stale smell of liquor, peasant furs, and wagon grease in the air. Drunken voices carried from table to table. Thick haired peasants slowly raised their heads like slumbering animals and then lowered them again. Their tongues were stuck between their lips.

52

Since my brother's guesthouse was not far from the railroad, I quickly said my prayers, ate a snack, and left immediately to see God's miracle: the little houses with their windows running over the tracks without the power of horses on wheels....

Oh, I cannot describe the impression of the train when my eyes saw it for the first time!
I think that the exhausted Columbus was not as enthusiastic about his discovered land as I was about my discovered train in Kene.
God in heaven, how often I thought of it involuntarily while studying the Gemara or lying on my bed in Lyubtsh at night. In my imagination, it always appeared in the form I had imagined it to have, according to the stories I had heard about it, and my heart overflowed with delight.

Now I saw the train before my eyes, a living, real, concrete one, and I could touch it with my fingers; I could touch a door, a staircase, and I could even bend down and touch a cool track...

You can't say that the train I imagined in my mind was an accurate representation of the train I saw in Kene. Obviously, the engineer who had built it had deviated completely from my imagination.
But I have to admit, considering all my desires and ambitions, that he, the engineer, built it better than I had imagined...

53

And I could hardly tear myself away from the train, its majestic, proud and sure gait.

Gradually a quiet life began in Kene. My brother arrived from Vilna. There was more talk about a "takhles" for me, and once again it remained that I should study at my brother's house in the meantime, or as they say in Lithuania: "Lernen far zikh" [to learn for yourself].

54

Chapter VI

Study, then you will have a good meal. – A tragic incident with a horse.- The sister-in-law's evil moral lecture. – I do not want to study any more. – The horror of Yomin-Neroim [Days of Awe]. – My brother’s "echad".- The prayer in vain. – I fall out of favour with one word.- Shmini-Atseres and Simkhes-Toyre in Kene. – Operating in other people's ovens.– “Dance, Jews!”. – At the miserly yishuvnik. – The horse again. – I'm going to Vilna. – Freed from two annoyances in one fell swoop.

My sister-in-law, a kind and simple woman, behaved very well towards me. And when she saw that I often looked at the Gemara and boasted that I was studying, she didn't know what to do with me.
"Just study," she said to me, "and you'll be fine with me. I'll give you plenty to eat and drink, and you won't have the slightest worry..."

But it's a strange thing: it's just as hard to want to learn with an empty stomach and a head full of worries as it is to want to learn when you're full, carefree and spoiled.
It's hard to learn when you have a good life.

55

And I ate well, slept well, walked a lot, ran to the railway, in the fields and in the woods...

My brother had also bought a beautiful little horse. I often got on it and rode with great pleasure through the open, light-flooded areas of Kene.
The good food, the freedom, the recklessness, the little horse - all this took away my appetite for the heavy, boring and dry thoughts and theories of the Gemara. What else is there to say, one had to have the heart of a bandit to sit and "shoklen" [rock] with the Gemara under such circumstances.

I noticed that my dear sister-in-law became a little colder and more distant towards me, but I couldn't help it: I was at such a level of friendship with the little horse at the time that it impressed me more than anything else in the world. You can't start destroying that friendship just because of your sister-in-law's evil eye.

However, the situation became much more tragic when once, in the middle of a ride, when I felt like Napoleon going out to conquer the world, the good, lively little horse threw me off its back onto the ground with such fury that I hurt myself so badly that I was barely alive when I crawled home.

56

I even wanted to keep the whole thing a secret. But I was looked at and asked: "What's wrong with you? Where did you get hurt that way?"
I replied stuttering:
"Be...me...an...accident...fell..."

Harsh words came out of my sister-in-law's mouth and fell on my head like sharp stones:
"I don't like boys like that, who don't learn, who hang around uselessly... I don't like rascals, loafers, good-for-nothings... Well, if you don't want to study, I'll give you a job: You will graze the animals in the field for me. I will make you a shepherd. A man has to do something. Everyone here works hard. There's no place for lazy people..."

After scolding me, she turned angrily and walked away. My brother growled barely audible:
"Well, yeah...a slacker...what good is that..."

I felt cornered on all sides: On one side, the horse that had played such a trick on me, and on the other, the sister-in-law who suddenly started saying such harsh words that I didn't even know what to say back.
I didn't know what to do and I didn't want to study...

Meanwhile, the month of Elul [August-September] suddenly appeared.

57

Early in the morning it was already clammy and cool, and in the evening white mists swirled and rolled over the fields.

Summer was slowly preparing to leave. The horror of the "Yomim-Neroim" [Days of Awe] haunted the soul. The small Jewish population of Kene trembled like a fish in water. The people turned to the Psalms and began to pray more fervently. They shouted their prayers louder and made their way to the Creator of the world in time so that He would not withdraw His goodness from the wretched people.
Throughout the morning, the sound of the shofar echoed far and wide over the mown and barren fields of Kene.

My dear brother, who had been strangely pious throughout the year, lost all sense of proportion in the month of Elul. He was constantly staring at the sky with his eyes and whispering with his lips. He was completely focused on "heavenly matters" even when he was doing an earthly thing.

My brother's "אחד" [echad] [1] in the month of Elul was a long, deeply felt expression of his extraordinary piety. During this time, his eyes would protrude as if they had slipped out of their sockets, he would rock his body anxiously like a willow in the wind, he would raise his fists high above his head and shake them violently in the air, and his lips and throat would agonize chokingly over a word or sound:

58

"א-ח-ח-ח-ד-ד-ד!" [E-cha-cha-cha-d-d-d]
Although I was young, anxious, and pious, I could not match my brother's piety. On the contrary, sometimes this piety repelled me instead of attracting me.

I couldn't get used to this "terror of Elul", to the shouting of prayers, to my brother's "אחד"...
I also just felt bad. I had lost the respect of my sister-in-law and everyone else. By the way, I unintentionally fell out of favor with a word that completely undermined my status in my brother's house.

This is how it happened:
On the evening of Rosh Hashanah, as we sat down to the big holiday dinner, my brother lifted up the plate with a huge fish head on it. He gawked with his eyes, as was his custom, and said the blessing with great religious fervor: יי יהי רצון שנהיה לראש ולא לזנב יי [May it be your will that we be the head and not the tail] [2] .
I smiled a little and then immediately made an offhand remark:

"It seems to me that this is a prayer in vain [3] ."
Everyone at the table looked at each other. My brother gave me an evil, staring look.

"What?" he asked. "What did you say, a prayer in vain?"
And immediately I felt a fiery slap on my left cheek...

59

"Shut up when we're at the table!" he shouted, fiddling angrily with the big fish's head.

I lowered my eyes. Blood rushed to my face. But my hot temper clung to a thought deep inside me, as if to save me:
"You have to get out of here! You can't stay here!"

It was a difficult, desperate dinner. Everyone was silent. I was the guilty one.
The whole holiday was like a weight on my shoulders. I could hardly bear it.
By the way, Shmini-Atseres [8th day of assembly, festival immediately following Sukkot] and Simkhes-Toyre [festival marking the end of the annual cycle of Torah reading] were quite joyful for us. The sad Days of Awe, with their cries of prayer, tears and lamentations, were now replaced by joy and celebration.

All these celebrations took place mainly in Kene. The small shtetl danced and sang, celebrated and drank - not at all in the Jewish way.
After prayers, the whole shtetl would go out as a group to pay visits.
It was a very nice custom. People went to the rich and the poor without distinction, and in each house the guests "took charge," not the "balebatim" [heads of families or homeowners]. The people came into the house shouting and making a lot of noise, with happy "hopkes" [dance tunes] to which they clapped their hands.

One of them shouted:

60

"Let us be merry! Dance, Jews! Sing, Jews! Ta-de-ri-de-dai-da-dai-da-dai-da!"

One "hopke" followed another, one dance followed another, both in the cramped house and in the spacious one. The boys yelled like young roosters, screaming at the top of their lungs, the women laughed, and the older Jews, arm in arm, danced a hopke, shook their beards and forelocks, let their eyes sparkle under their big eyebrows, and sang along:
"Ta-de-ri-de-rai-da-rai-da..."
"Dance, Jews! Sing, Jews! Let it be merry!"

Then they toasted each other, opened the oven, took out the fat "tsimes" [stew] with the "stuffed [goose] necks" and stood in a tight group to eat right out of the pot. They ate and danced a "hopke" with it - they drank and danced a "hopke" with it. And when they had finished eating and dancing in one house, they went in turn to the next house.

Finally, the whole dancing party entered the house of a rude and miserly village Jew, who had prepared nothing for the cheerful but uninvited guests.
They opened his oven and pulled out a pot of puny white potatoes that hadn't even been boiled long enough.

But the gang was not deterred or offended. First they danced and shouted and sang, as was their custom.

61

Then they took a large bucket of water, put it on the table with great emphasis, took a loaf of brown bread, cut it into pieces, and each ate a piece of bread and drank cold water with it...
And then the same thing began again:
"Let's be merry! Dance, Jews! Sing, Jews! Ta-de-ri-de-rai-da-rai-da..."
And they turned everything upside down in the stingy village Jew's house.

After the holiday, I urged my brother to take me to Vilna and put me in a yeshivah there.
"You won't study," he argued.
"I want to study," I replied.

Soon there was an opportunity to go to Vilna. It was the same little horse that I had befriended and that had betrayed me so badly. It had thrown me to the ground and hurt me without pity. That horse had recently become so wild and stubborn that it was impossible to handle. No matter how much it was beaten and whipped, it would neither obey nor walk. It persisted in the following objection:
"Beat me today, beat me tomorrow, it will help you as much as the snows of yesteryear".

62

It was decided that the horse would be taken to Vilna. There it would be sold and I would return to a yeshivah.
Meanwhile, my sister-in-law mocked me angrily and curtly:
"This will get rid of two annoyances at once: the horse and Meir...one will not obey and will not take a step, and the other will not learn...both will not obey, both are good for nothing!"

I didn't answer my sister-in-law. I just pursed my lips and thought that I had to escape as soon as possible.

One fine morning we went to Vilna.
I left my brother's house relieved. I only missed the fields, the woods, and most of all the train, the little station in Kene... In Vilna, the horse was immediately sold and I was given to the Ramayles Yeshivah. As my dear sister-in-law put it, this got rid of two big annoyances in one fell swoop.

*

[1] The author describes a kind of ecstatic state into which his pious brother falls in the month of Elul, in view of the ten “Days of Awe“, the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur [the Day of Atonement and the holiest day of fasting in the Jewish calendar]. His condition is apparently triggered by his intense godliness. At a time when pious Jews are filled with feelings of repentance and remorse, he trembles before the judging G-d and, of course, before the possible consequences of his own transgressions.

But there is another aspect that comes into play here, and that is the emphasis on “echad“. “Echad“ is a Hebrew term related to the number “one“ and to G‘d, among other things. The term appears very frequently in the Tanakh, including in Jewish prayers. It is of great importance in the Jewish prayer and creed, the “Shema Yisrael“[Deuteronomy, chapter 6, verse 4] in which the unity and oneness of G‘d is very clearly proclaimed. “Echad“ is the very essence, the very definition of G’d. It is perhaps the inkling of the uniqueness and unimaginable greatness of this one G‘d who exists in Himself, which cannot be described in words, and which leaves the brother in a reverent, stunned ecstasy, but above all in fear.

[2] On Rosh Hashanah, it is traditional to serve food that has special symbolism. Often a special blessing is recited before each dish is eaten. A fish head – or any other kosher animal head – on the Rosh Hashanah table symbolizes that we are at the beginning of a new year, not the end. The above blessing comes from Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 28:13) and expresses the desire to be in a position of leadership and to be successful – financially and spiritually, but also figuratively.

[3] The original Hebrew term is תפילה-שוה, which hardly makes sense in this context. I think what is meant here is תפילת-שוא. This term comes from the Mishnah and refers to a prayer for a circumstance that has already happened or is present, so that there is no possibility of it not happening. In Yiddish term is usually translated as “prayer in vain“.

63

Chapter VII

The Ramailes [1] Yeshivah. - A Jewish theological academy. - The system of "limudim". - After 50 years. - Strange grimaces and cries. - Misery and hunger. - At the table of others. - The suffering of shame. - A little philosophy because of "esn teg". -R' Eliya Mushnik. - Six singing daughters. - A morning picture of the yeshivah.

The famous Ramayles Yeshivah was located not far from the Vilnius "shulhoyf" [synagogue courtyard]. It was an old three-story house (*) full of Talmud students.

Fifty years ago it had been a real theological academy. The yeshivah consisted of seven classes, or "shiurim" as they were then called, with seven independent heads [deans] of the yeshivah. I can still see them all standing before my eyes today, as if they were alive, and I could name each and every one of these very distinguished Jews.

*) The house later collapsed, and the yeshivah was rebuilt as a new purpose-built building on Slovatska Street.

64

The Ramailes Yeshivah with all its students, leaders and teachers is forever etched in my memory. Even the students who were admitted to the first class were required to know one page of Gemara, and by the seventh class there was already ordination to the rabbinate.

The method of teaching was simple: the dean of the yeshivah would recite a lesson from the Gemara, and the students would repeat it without difficulty. In addition, each learned "for himself".
It is remarkable that once, fifty years ago, especially in Vilna and in the Ramailes Yeshivah, it was not considered a sin for a Talmud student to learn Russian or German. There were many Talmud students who also attended the Jewish secular school called "Yevreyskoye-Utshilishtshe".
Later, after several years, co-classes with secular education were introduced in the yeshivah, so that those who finished the yeshivah also finished a course in a 4-class school.

Fifty years later, I drove past Vilna and visited this famous place of the Torah. I went there with my heart pounding. I thought that I would find there, on the one hand, a high model yeshivah and, on the other hand, a high educational institution of secular subjects.
As if two streams were flowing peacefully - one purely Jewish, the other secular, and both complementing each other.
But I was very disappointed.

65

Fifty years had passed, half a century. The world had seen wonderful inventions and discoveries, but also terrible upheavals, and Ramailes Yeshivah had not only not progressed, it had fallen generations behind. The once respected yeshivah was unrecognizable.

Neither the Talmud students nor the enthusiasm of the past were there, nor the deans of the yeshivah with their wise views on the subject. It is noteworthy that the Talmud tractate Kiddushin was now taught throughout the yeshivah. Even small children were taught it. The teachers were moldy and [their concepts] were completely out of date. Everything was turned upside down: Now, after fifty years, a Talmud student was no longer allowed to study secular subjects or to pick up a "treyf-psul" [unkosher patch], as they called it there. And if someone was caught with such a secular textbook or book, he was expelled from the yeshivah without any discussion.

The yeshivah made an especially strong impression on me in the evenings, when they studied "muser" [morality] with the Talmud students. I would watch and listen. The "mashgiekh" [rabbinic supervisor], a black-haired young man with clever eyes, sat at the table and used to shout squeakily. All the Talmud students would look at [the text of] "Mesillas Yeshorim" [The Path of the Upright] and repeat his shouts: the voices and shouts were accompanied by such strange grimaces and contortions, with a kind of fidgeting and flailing in all directions, that I involuntarily remembered a house with a certain name.

66

"Why are you shouting like that?" I asked a student.
He paused for a moment, opened a pair of puzzled eyes, looked around, calmed down a bit, then apparently came to his senses and answered:

"Why am I shouting? Because it is commanded, I am shouting...you hear, everyone is shouting!"
I left the yeshivah with a troubled mind, as if I had lost a beautiful memory that I had carried in my heart for a long time.

In my time, the Ramailes Yeshivah had truly been a house of Torah and wisdom. I studied there with perseverance - and I really wanted to learn! No one had to push me, chase me, or preach morality. I was fascinated by the general diligence, the informal zeal, the good and wise order of the yeshivah.

I was doing very well in the Ramailes Yeshivah, but the hardship and sad poverty completely overwhelmed me. You can't study on an empty stomach. The feeling of hunger tormented me day and night. The word "food" was always on the tip of my tongue. I often saw a piece of bread in front of my eyes, as if it wanted to provoke me...
But I couldn't help myself.

67

Who could I go to with my complaints? The city was big, hard and strange, and I was small and awkward. I slept on the hard bench in the yeshivah, without a pillow. My light coat served as a blanket. Early in the morning I would get up lazy, angry and with a disgusting taste in my mouth. I often yawned and rubbed my eyes.
But that wasn't the worst of it. The hunger was killing me. You can get used to sleeping badly on a hard "bed," but you can't endure constant hunger. The stomach is by nature a cruel fellow, and it doesn't like it when you owe it something...

Sometimes a day was easier for me. That was the day my brother went to Vilna to buy some goods. I would get a few kopecks from him, which seemed to me like infinite wealth. The whole world suddenly became a little freer, wider and bigger.

Sometimes my brother's brother-in-law also went to Vilna. He would usually open his linen bag and throw me a 10 or 15 kopeck coin...
Sometimes I could also perform a service, such as reading the Torah or going to a mourner to pray. I also earned a few kopecks from these activities.
But I couldn't eat my fill with that money.

68

Hunger ran after me in frustration, demanding its right. Like all Talmud students, I went to "esn teg," but the problem was that I was fed only four days a week. Of course, the day I received a meal did not always satisfy a starving boy. After all, it was someone else's table, and what's more, it was a gift lunch....

In fact, the yeshivah even gave out bread. But it's good to have something to go with the bread. If you eat dry bread every day, you get sick of it and can't swallow it.

It was especially painful on the Sabbath. I didn't have a special place to eat on Shabbat. Every Shabbat I had to go to the "gabe" [Jewish religious functionary] of the yeshivah, and every

Shabbat he would send me with a note called "plet" to another "balebos" [landlord] at his table.

I would arrive at a strange, unfamiliar house with my heart pounding and my cheeks flushed with shame. I wasn't ashamed because I was hungry and they had to feed me. I understood even then that a "kloyznik" [a man who devotes all his time to sacred study in the synagogue] should not be ashamed of such a thing. Many great people had gone "esn teg" and it had not offended them at all. I was ashamed because the house was strangely foreign to me, as if I had somehow fallen into it from the roof, and because the people in the houses were very familiar with each other.

69

And I couldn't fit in and enjoy that familiarity and coziness. I got a meal, but not a cozy intimacy. I knew that the latter "meal" was more valuable than the former, and so I unintentionally felt ashamed.

I still remember all the places where I ate Shabbat meals. I can still see the rooms, the furniture, the people with their movements, and hear their voices. I can still say their names.

I remember the happiest Shabbat I spent with R' Eliyahu Mushnik. He had half a dozen daughters of his own who sang "zmires" [psalm songs] at the table. Some of them had beautiful soprano voices. When I got to know this house, I joined the "zmires choir," so much so that the singing filled me with joy for almost a whole week.
It can be said that in this house, I benefited not only from a holiday meal, but also from a pleasant familiarity and coziness, which I needed so much.

The "gaboim" [Jewish religious functionaries] of the Ramailes were well-known wealthy men and Jewish scholars from Vilna. Two of them, R' Meir-Aharon Katsenelnboygn and the historian A. Rabinovitsh, came every week to examine the Talmud students, and these examinations were marked in a secular way with "balls" such as "א, ב, ג, ד, ה" [a, b, g, d, h] [2].
.

I don't remember the exams scaring the Talmud students.

70

Possibly the examiners were good people who approached the poor young students with seriousness and fairness. But it is also possible that there were very few spoiled and depraved children among us who allowed themselves to go overboard.
Almost all of us knew that the yeshivah was exclusively a place of learning. There was no other purpose. And that is why you really learned with perseverance and passion.

I don't know if the richest man slept as deeply and soundly in his soft, warm bed as I did on the hard bench without a pillow. Like I said, it takes some getting used to. And when I got used to it, I found the greatest comfort and rest in sleep.

But in the winter we had to get up at five o'clock in the morning, and that was such a difficult operation that I still shudder when I think of it.
The "shames" [caretaker of the synagogue] would snatch the young students from their sleep like a thief without pity. And if someone didn't want to get up, he would make a scandal out of it.
We used to lift our disheveled heads from the benches, yawn long and wide, and rub our eyes incessantly to drive out of them the sweet sleep that had a thousand charms for us...

And outside lay the heavy, cold winter night. The wind rattled the windows of the yeshivah, making them tremble silently.

The shames lit the small, smoky night lights. Long, wiggling shadows hung on the walls. They imitated our every hand and head movement, as if mocking us.

Two yeshivah boys sit on the bench with their legs hanging down, buttoning their pants. Both are pale, disheveled, and their skinny bodies occasionally shiver.
"Yosele," one of them says with a long and somewhat crowing yawn, "Yosl, if I hadn't been woken up, I would have slept a whole day and night without interruption."....
"And what about food?" asks the other.
"Bah! You don't have to eat, you fool, who wants to eat while sleeping?"
"And I saw a dream in my sleep," says the other, rubbing his eyes thoroughly.
"What did you see?"
"Listen, I saw a wedding and musicians and wedding guests and the bride and groom and long tables with big, big plates of fish on them..."

"Get up, you shall not even be thought of [3]!" the shames cries wildly at the sleeping boy, who has his head on the hard bench. "Get up, I tell you!"
And he stomps his feet in anger.

[1] The author uses the former name of the yeshivah, “Reb Mailes Yeshivah”, which later became “Ramailes”. Reb Maile is considered the building's donor.

[2] The "ball" or sequential letter designation of exams refers to a system for grading or classifying exam performance. This system uses letters or other symbols to indicate different levels of performance.

[3] This seemingly inappropriate angry exclamation seems to have originated in a curse in Ezekiel 21:37. It is possible that the angry curse gradually lost its profound meaning after it was incorporated into everyday language.

*

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Chapter VIII

My yeshivah earnings. - Carving. - The earnings of “one day a year”. - The former “shalekhmones” among Jews. - A day of gifts. - Leyb Znitselski. - I will become a carver. - Antokolsky. - The atmosphere of a former worker. -Mikhke and Tsalke. - Lewdness and drunkenness. - Beatings in the attic. – I leave Vilna.

Poverty made me hungry, and hunger always awakened my ideas, my abilities. I was always obsessed with the idea that I had to earn something, that I had to help myself out of my misery.
And so I began to carve in my spare time during my studies. I carved wooden pointers for Torah scrolls and marble seals. I wasn't bad at it, and experts said I had good skills. I earned a little money from time to time from this new and sudden occupation.
By the end of the winter I was earning the famous "one day a year" income.

73

I am referring to the earnings of a "shalekhmones treger" [Purim food gift deliverer]. This beautiful tradition of "shalekhmones" is slowly dying out these days. You no longer see it in the big cities, and it is slowly disappearing in the provinces as well.
But in my day, Purim was not only a day of joy and "beating Haman," a day of "hamantashen" and cheerful schnapps, but above all a day of gifts. The Jewish world sent gifts to each other.

Young and old, rich and poor. The streets and alleys are teeming with "shalekhmones". Each of them carries a flat plate covered with a small cloth. And hidden under the cloth is an orange, some candy, chocolate and other goodies, depending on how much the sender of the "shalekhmones" [Purim gifts] can give.

When the " shalekhmones treger" enters a home, the plate is uncovered. Some of the good things that please the eye with their hidden charm are taken down, and the poor bearer is paid for his journey. From the pieces of "shalekhmones" taken down, new "shalekhmones" plates are assembled and combined, which in fact are immediately "sent back to the street".
It is a day of joyful running around, a rush of friendship and gifts.

No one is stingy on this day. Everyone, rich or poor, wants to give joy.

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And he wants to remind his friend, relative or acquaintance that he exists with a gift that is so mysteriously hidden under a cloth on the plate...

I too had joined the great, happy army of "shalekhmones" deliverers and had a very lucky day. Whatever house I entered with the traditional plate and cloth, I was welcomed with a cheerful greeting and rewarded for my way.
The metal coins in my pocket rang sweetly and often reminded me of their power. And I needed that power now.

My shoes were already torn to shreds, giving way to all the hostile winds, snow, and mud. But there was no question of throwing them away and buying new ones. Now, however, the little crowd of coins was singing in my ear about new shoes, and it was a song to be fulfilled.
On the day of "shalekhmone" I actually got enough for a pair of new shoes that I couldn't take my eyes off.

But from this Purim, from this "once a year" income, I will now jump to a mourner. Along with several other boys from the yeshivah, I was called to a mourner to pray with a minyen [prayer quorum of ten adults].

The mourner was a woodcarver from Vilna, and I still remember his name, Leyb Znitselski.

Since we were visiting a woodcarver, I thought about it, and out of curiosity I took a pointer that I had carved very finely in the yeshivah.
After the prayer, I showed Leyb my pointer and asked for his expert opinion.

75

But the Jew was truly amazed at my work.
"This is very finely done," he marveled, shaking his head from side to side. "A well-crafted piece of work."

And after a while he spoke seriously:
"Listen, I have some good advice for you. I can see that you are a very talented boy at carving. In fact, my advice is that you should apprentice with me for four or five years, then you will become a real expert and a really good earner!"

I remained silent. He looked at my pointer again and said:
"After all, it's a beautiful piece of work! Who knows, maybe another Antokolsky will grow out of you... he [Mark Matveyevich Antokolsky] also first learned to carve from Khatskl the carver, and today he is known all over the world. You see, he has had a living and a reputation all his life".

When he saw that I was hesitating and still silent, he spoke in a calm, warm tone, like a father to a child:
"I see you're a poor boy, you go "esn teg". Yeshivah makes no sense for you. You're going to starve... and what have you done to deserve it? You are a talented boy, and with me you will soon reach a 'takhles'. With me you'll have something to eat, drink and sleep. You'll have your own little corner and a home."

He spoke so beautifully and I was convinced.

76

It was not difficult for me. The days of hunger, the hard bench to sleep on, lined up before my eyes like gray soldiers, and every argument in favor of the yeshivah immediately disappeared from my mind. In times of need, the smallest help is the strongest argument.

I moved (with very little luggage) from the yeshivah to Leyb Znitselski and a new life began for me.
It was a completely new environment, new people, new customs, new words.

As you know, when a boy starts an apprenticeship, he is not allowed to work [in his field of study]. Before that, he has to work very hard around the house. He becomes a kind of servant, carrying the toilet buckets, scrubbing the floors, carrying the luggage, and getting beaten up. I was very lucky in that respect. I didn't experience any slavery in the house. Leyb, the woodcarver, kept his word. He put me to work from the very first day.

I entered the woodcarving house as an equal member and with the high stamp of a talented boy. It didn't take me long to realize that I wasn't living badly there. There was an old-fashioned, cozy, working-class atmosphere with very human relations. But it had its faults, especially for me, a young, provincial, naive boy.
There were two other boys who worked with Leyb, the woodcarver.

77

One of them, a baker's son, never took his hat off, but, God forbid, not out of piety, but for another reason altogether...

One of the two lads was called Mikhke. He was a skillful, enterprising boy who used to sing obscene songs at work. Of course, these songs did not have a good educational effect on me, who had always heard modest, guarded and well-chosen words around me.

The other, Tsalke, was a giant of a boy, who unfortunately suffered from lack of sleep: his bed "hated dryness"...
Tsalke could not sing like Mikhke, but he could talk. And while Mikhke sang obscene songs, Tsalke rattled off obscene words all day long. They were both very good and kind-hearted boys who probably mistakenly thought that street songs and words were a nice, cozy way to socialize. They felt a certain heroism in it.

Leyb Znitselski himself, a tall young man with a pointed beard, was not a bad person by nature. You never saw him as a dogged, greedy employer who wanted to squeeze everything out of his workers. On the contrary, you were more likely to hear a humane word from him, and here and there he showed a very humane relationship with his workers. However, he loved two things that didn't suit a Jew at all: alcohol and women...

78

Sometimes he would come in drunk from the street and throw his fists at his unhappy wife. Usually there was commotion, noise and complaints in the house, but at that time people couldn't do anything with Leyb. He was drunk and didn't understand what was being said to him.

"I want..." he usually began to speak with a heavy tongue, staring with strangely wide eyes. "I want to crush you all!...I want to crush you..."

The worst was when he was drunk late at night, when everyone was fast asleep and had forgotten that there was a bitter drop in the world that could ruin an honest Jewish home.

There are quiet drunks, those who have enough strength and sense to shield themselves in a corner, not to show themselves to people, and to wait until their intoxication wears off.
But there are also drunks who fall into a wild state, who lose consciousness and control over their own actions. Leyb Znitselski was one of the latter. He suffered from severe drunkenness.

Of course, this house, which at first glance seemed to be a very comfortable, honest place to work, made me bitter. Sometimes it suffocated me and I longed for purity, silence and decency.

Nevertheless, I worked with Leyb Znitselski for a whole year.

79

And I achieved a great effect in my work, so that he, Leyb Znitselski, even began to pay me a little for it.
But I left him because of his drunkenness and his second peculiarity - women.
This is how it happened.
Khalemoyd [In the middle of the] Passover holiday, our "balebos" [boss] came home drunk as a skunk. As was his custom, he immediately started screaming and threatening with a heavy tongue, "I want you all..."
Then he left the house and I breathed a sigh of relief. After a while, however, I heard terrible screams coming from the attic. My whole body was shaking. I opened the door and went up to the attic.

There I saw an image that burned into my memory like a sharp knife. The balebos was pulling the maid by her hair, ready to throw her to the ground. He bared his teeth and his eyes crawled wildly out of their sockets. The girl screamed and struggled with her last ounce of strength.
The balebos grabbed her by the throat.

Cold sweat ran down my brow. My hands inadvertently clenched into fists. When he saw that I was also standing in the attic, he let go of the girl and turned to me:
"What are you doing?" he said, foaming at the mouth. "Who called for you? I want you...".

80

The year of working with the carver had a great effect on my hands: they had become stronger. It was as if the chisel and hammer had given up some of their iron to them.
I began to fight with the balebos. But he was drunk. I responded to one of his moves with ten of my own. I started hitting him on the head until he fell. He was bleeding from his ear and nose.

Then I ran down from the attic and went to my relative's house. I spent the other days of Passover with this relative and didn't leave the house the whole time. I was afraid of the

balebos and his workers. They might have killed me because of the brutal beating I had given the drunk in the attic.

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81

Chapter XI

My march from Vilna to Lyubtsh - 135 verst on foot. - The stages of the march. - The inns for the night. - The difficult third day. - Suffering from bloody feet. - The good advice of a peasant. - The end of the forest. - The Jew with the cart. -I will be saved. - Delyatitsh.

The day after Passover I left my relative. I took my tefillin bag and marched along the "Lide" dirt road [1] to Lyubtsh. I was afraid to spend another day in Vilna.
It is certainly not arrogance on my part to say that this was a very daring, courageous action. The distance from Vilna to Lyubtsh is 130 verst [138 km]. To undertake this journey on foot, in an unfamiliar area, certainly required courage, considering my age and my almost empty pockets.

I left Vilna at noon. It was a cold day.

82

Here and there, in the pits and ditches, there was still snow. The open field wind whistled in my ears and whipped my face from the side.
Nevertheless, I continued bravely, ignoring the fact that my tight shoes were hurting my feet. But when I realized that the shoes were only in my way, I did what all wise and practical peasants do: I took the shoes off my feet, threw them over my shoulders, and marched on barefoot. ....

I walked 35 verst until seven o'clock in the evening and stopped at a tavern. I had a glass of tea and a piece of brown bread and spent the night on a hard bench in the tavern.

The next morning I started again. I walked even faster than the day before, with the doggedness of an orphan fighting for his poor life.

The path stretched between fields and woods, never ending. I didn't even stop to catch my breath. I probably ran more than I walked. My eyes saw little around me. All I felt was the wind in my face and my bare feet hitting a stone or stepping into a puddle of cold water.

83

But I had to stop at a fork in the road and ask a passing farmer for directions.

I managed a full fifty verst [53 km] that day! That's a lot for a grown man, but especially for a hungry boy. Something like an inner impulse nudged my shoulder and my feet - I should keep going, keep going.

Again I stopped at a tavern, where I spent the night on a hard bench. But the next morning, when I started my journey again barefoot, I realized that I couldn't walk. My feet were bruised and bloody from the stones on the path, and they burned like fire.

I pushed myself to make a second attempt. I wanted to ignore the pain, not listen to my body's protest, and continue on my way. But in vain. The pain was stronger than the eagerness and energy. I felt like I wasn't walking on earth but on hot, burning needles.

I sat down by the side of the road and hung my head in despair. How could I go on? How could I get out of this situation?

It was a passing farmer who helped me out of my predicament.
"Why are you sitting there?" he asked me with the compassion of a country man.
"I can't walk," I complained, "I've hurt my feet, you can see!"
"I have some advice for you," he said.

I lifted my head.
"What advice do you have?"
The farmer said:
"There is a small river not far from here. Go there and put your feet in the water. It's a cure for sore, bare feet. The water will take away the pain!"

I dragged myself to the river in great pain. I sat down on the bank and let my feet slide into the water. They were gripped by a sharp, cutting cold. But I didn't pull my feet out of the water.

Later, when I got up and began to walk, I felt that my feet were healthy again. And I set off with the same impulse as the day before.

It was the third day of my journey. I was running out of the small change I had in my pocket. I was starving. The march from Vilna to Lyubtsh required good food, but all the time I had eaten only a piece of black bread and tea.
With each passing hour, hunger tightened its iron grip on me. I felt dizzy, my legs buckled and my ears rang like a hundred bells...

My common sense told me that I should go to the first best inn or even to a farmer's house and simply ask for something to eat.

There is no shame in hunger. But I couldn't fight my shame. It was stronger than my hunger. So the third day of my journey ended very badly. I was running out of energy from hunger. And twenty-five verst before Lyubtsh, near the shtetl Ivye, in a large, dense forest, I suddenly fell down on the road...

It was evening. A red sun was setting low between the trees. Heavy evening shadows fell on the ground.
Images of the forest flashed through my hot mind, each more terrifying than the last. I saw bears, wolves, lions, and dragons. They were all terribly hungry and wanted to devour me.

My heart beat like a thief's. Cold sweat covered me from head to toe. I know what it's like to sleep alone in a strange tavern among peasants, but how do you sleep in the forest, in a dense, large forest among wild animals and predators?

Night began to fall. I saw the stars twinkle above my head, casting a little light into the dark forest. I saw them with the half-closed eyes of a deadly tired and half-starved man. And for the first time I wanted to cry for my miserable fate...

Suddenly a cart came creaking by. I recognized the silhouette of a Jew in the cart...

86

Of course, I should have jumped up from my seat and asked the Jew to take me with him. But I was so weak that I let the opportunity pass me by. It would have taken at least a little strength, but I had none left.
I heard the cart pulling away, and with each distant creak of the wheels I felt as if the last thread connecting me to the forest and the living human world was breaking.
After a while, however, a miracle happened. Was it just my imagination? Was it just an idea in my fevered mind?
The cart returns! The distant sounds are getting closer. I can even hear the horse breathing.
And now, after a moment, the Jew stops beside me.
He gets out of the cart, walks over to me and asks me: "Why are you lying there?
I can hardly answer:
"Weak...walked from Vilna...nothing to eat...".
"Never mind," says the Jew, " climb on the wagon, I'll take you there."
My joy at being released from the dense night forest immediately gave me new strength. It turns out that joy is the best medicine against all illnesses.
I jumped into the wagon with the Jew and we drove off.

87

When I told the Jew the details of my journey, he gave me some bagels to keep me going. Let him live, the good Jew, he did indeed keep me alive!

That night, somehow, the sky suddenly became brighter for me. A new hope blossomed in me.

"Vyo, vyo" [Giddap], he spurred on his horse, and I thought that I was still doing what I wanted to do: To make it from Vilna to Lyubtsh.

Leyb Znitselski with his drunkenness, Mikhke with his lewd songs, Tsalke with his dirty words, the boy who never took off his hat - they were all far away from me now. I had cut off a heavy piece of Vilna life.

I don't know what will happen in Lyubtsh and how I will be received there. But Lyubtsh is the town where I was born, the shtetl of my parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances, and whatever happens, I must find some peace and quiet there.

The Jew let me stay two verst from the shtetl Delyatitsh, five verst from Lyubtsh. When I thanked the Jew, I used all the kind words at my disposal. But the Jew didn't think so much of my kind words of thanks, but rather of the "mitsve" [religious commandment of good deeds] he had earned.
He thought he had saved a boy from great terror, and I certainly thought the same.

88

"Good night," I called after the Jew, as he gave the whip to the horse and the cart started off.
"Good year," he called back, "you're going to spend the night in Delyatitsh, aren't you?"
"Yes, in Delyatitsh!"
"Well, once again, good night!"

I had an aunt in Delyatitsh. She took me in with joy, with warm words and good food. I rested on a soft bed, and in the two days I spent with her, I forgot all my aches and pains.

[1] Since I'm not entirely sure about my translation and can't rule out any spelling mistakes in the original, I'll give the terminus literally here: “un hob avekgespant mitn lider trakt”.

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89

Chapter X

Lyubtsh. - My mother's earnings. - R' Meir the cantor again. - My uncle Khatskl. - The fire. - "Meirl, help!". - Moyshe the carpenter. - With the aristocrat Milevski. - R' Aba-Vigder. - "Brokhe will be your bride!". - I flee from Lasdun.

And now I'm back in Lyubtsh. My mother welcomed me very warmly. She had divorced her husband, the bookseller from Nyesvizh, and returned to Lyubtsh. Here she had opened a cheder for girls. She taught them to pray and introduced them to the God-fearing "ivre-taytsh" [1] of the "Zene-urene" [Ze'enah ure'enah, the Jewish book of edification], the "Shevet Mosar," the "Menorat ha-ma'or," and other Jewish books.

During the month of Elul, when the "bes-oylem-yarid" [the hustle and bustle of the Jewish cemetery] began, Mother was usually at the cemetery every day reciting the prayers and supplications of the "Maane-Lashon" [name of a book of cemetery prayers] with the women. She earned her living from all these activities.

90

But you can't really say that I lived so well in Lyubtsh that I could forget all my troubles. There, too, poverty haunted me. I was a great pauper. It was warm outside. The trees began to blossom, and young green grass happily covered every inch of the earth. On such sweet, golden days I had no shoes (the shoes I had bought in Vilna had become too small for me), no suit (I was wearing an old fur), and not even a proper shirt.

Since I was an heir to our house in Lyubtsh, I turned to our neighbor, R' Meir, the cantor, to pay me some rent.

R' Meir the cantor had long since decided for himself that it was easier and more convenient not to pay rent than to pay it, and so he did not.
When I reminded him that I was one of the landlords, he scratched the back of his head.

"Yes," he muttered, "in fact, rent is due...I cannot deny it...certainly it will be due...and I may have to pay it...".

He was still scratching his head and couldn't look me in the eye.
But then his wife intervened.
"Who are you going to pay the rent to," she shouted at her husband, "there are so many heirs! This one and that one is an heir, and they are all heirs... if I give something to this one, the other one will come and make demands.

91

If I give something to the other one, the first one will come and demand it. It's a never-ending story...".

I realized that this was a lame excuse and I was very bitter. I also began to shout. But since I was a strong boy with the stamp of someone who had walked 135 kilometers from Vilna to Lyubtsh on foot, and since I was also shouting in Russian, a language that could frighten the strongest person in Lyubtsh, the cantor's belligerent wife gave up a little, and the cantor was already scratching not only the back of his head, but his whole head.
They looked at each other and mumbled unintelligible words.

Then I pushed even harder, my Russian came out like cannon shots. The cantor's wife gave in and paid me twenty-five rubles.

In those days it was a very handsome sum. I put on some clothes, had a few things sewn for me, and was able to walk the streets again. What's more, the suit I had sewn was the latest fashion, the way the "Germans" were dressed:
A short jacket and long, wide trousers. People in the shtetl looked at me rather strangely. Others made a remark:
"Apikors..." [heretic].

But I didn't care. Do the barbarians know anything about the fashion sense of a suit?

92

A suit that, when worn, makes you hold your head up high and walk with a bounce in your step?
This suit even caught the eye of my rich uncle Khatskl, who had married off his son and organized a "kidesh" [2] for the Jews of the entire shtetl on Shabbat. I was not invited to the kidesh. I even passed by my rich uncle's windows a few times, but no one invited me in, as if they didn't even know me.
I won't say that this didn't bother me, but out of spite and to everyone's annoyance, I consoled myself with my beautiful, "meaningful" suit...

That same Shabbat, when the "kidesh" was being organized at my uncle Khatskl's house, in the evening a great fire broke out in the shtetl. The fire was as fast as a cat, jumping from one roof to another. My uncle Khatskl's house with the stores was in great danger. The fire was approaching the house by the minute. The people inside began to pack their belongings. Their screams echoed in the air.
I arrived there just as my aunt Libe, my uncle Khatskl's wife, ran out of the house screaming. When she saw me, she grabbed my hands and shouted:
"Meirl, we are of the same blood, help us to save our property, our possessions! Help us, Meirl, help us!"

93

It was really a very tragic moment, but I still had enough courage to tell her harshly:
"In a fire, it's 'Meirl help,' but at a party, I'm worse than a stranger....Isn't that right, Auntie?"

Of course, I couldn't discuss this with my aunt right now. She didn't even hear what was said to her, but I still said what was so painfully on my mind.

Despite my modern suit, I still had to think about business. All the worries weighed on my young bones. There was no one else to take care of it. I had to help myself.
It was then that I met Moyshe the carpenter on the street, a son of my rabbi [at the yeshivah]. After a year of working in the woodcarving workshop in Vilna, I was talking to Moyshe the carpenter about furniture work like an expert.

Moyshe the carpenter was a fine, honest Jew and a good craftsman. He was also a Jewish scholar and a joker. He would often add a joke and a little smile to any conversation.
"I don't know what to do," I complained to him, "I walk around the shtetl and see no business for myself."

"You can carve," Moyshe said.

94

"Well, what am I supposed to do with the fact that I can do that?"
"Look, it's a business," he laughed, "what else do you want?"
"I want to make a living!"

He thought for a while.
"Listen to what I have to tell you. I have now accepted a great commission from Count Milevski, who has built a great palace not far from Lyubtsh. If you are a skillful boy and good at carving, I will take you with me to work. You'll earn good money there.

I could not have imagined greater happiness. After a few days I went with him to Lasdun - that was the name of Milevski's estate.
The count, a tall, pale young man, showed us the models of the furniture he had received from Paris. They were models of a bedroom, a dining room, a reception room, and so on.

I looked at them carefully and he asked:
"And you're really good at carving?"
I replied:
"If you give me all the tools I need, I'll start!"
The count agreed.
After a short time, all the tools and instruments necessary for carving were brought from Vilna, and I set to work with great enthusiasm.

95

In fact, the work had to be done very quickly. After two months I had finished carving the furniture for two rooms. The count was very pleased with my work and paid me well. And Moyshe rubbed his hands with great pleasure.

"You see," he said with a slight smile, "the business is in you, and you don't even feel it..."

There was still a lot of work to be done with the aristocrat, and Moyshe continued to warm me up.
"This work will make you a rich man. You'll fill your pockets with money here!"

But as sometimes happens in such cases, suddenly everything came to an end.
The change started with a very simple, harmless thing. On Shabbat, I went with Moyshe to the "minyen" convened by the tenant of the nearby liquor factory. I was honored with the "mafter" [last Torah reading on Shabbat], and I read the "haftoyre" [haftorah, chapters of the Prophets] very festively and tastefully.

In the Vilna Yeshivah I had learned the art of reciting the "haftoyre" beautifully. The audience was enchanted. It had the same effect on them as, for example, a good religious concert...

R' Aba-Vigder, the tenant of Count Milevski's inn, was also present at the minyen. He was a Jew who belonged to the enlightened people of the old school, the really good teachers.

96

They also had knowledge of secular subjects and worldly languages, such as German and French.
Among the tenants were not only good Jews, but also educated Jews.

The tavern had two main sections: In one section, the peasants sat at long tables and drank, pouring the bitter drop into their mouths until they completely lost their human faces. They drank and screamed, they drank and kissed wildly like madmen, and they drank and beat each other murderously. The air there was always thick, solid, and heavy, filled with bad human fumes, sweat, and the smell of snuff.

In the second part, however, it was bright and quiet, clean and pure. There you could see the "orn-koydesh" [holy shrine with the Torah scrolls] on the wall and the high shelves with religious books. The tenant would sit at the table and look very seriously into a religious book. In this way, two lifestyles developed side by side: One with wild drinking, the other with silence and Jewish learning.

After the prayer, R' Aba-Vigder came to me. He looked at me very kindly and said:
"This is the first time I have heard a simple craftsman recite the haftoyre so beautifully.
And immediately he added: "Come and see me this afternoon. I'd like to talk to you for a while."

I had no idea why he needed me.

Nevertheless, I went to see him that afternoon. It was a nice, bourgeois home of Torah and money.
R' Aba-Vigder was sitting there teaching a page of Gemara to his son, a boy of fifteen. I heard him slowly and clearly translating one sugya [literary theme] after another from the first section of the Talmudic tractate "Kiddushin" [sanctification through marriage]. I knew this passage by heart.

R' Aba-Vigder raised his eyes and asked me to sit down. After a while he asked me a question [in Hebrew]:
"Where are you from?"
I answered [in Hebrew]:
"I am from Lyubtsh, the son of R' Moyshe Pisiuk".
He looked at me with astonished eyes:
"What, you're Moyshe Pisiuk's son? Moyshe Pisiuk's son is a craftsman, a worker? What are you saying?"
"You knew my father?" I asked.
"Of course I knew him. He was a very decent Jew. I'm sure he would not have allowed his son to reach this [low] level!"

R' Aba-Vigder was an educated Jew, but he viewed the craft with the rigid eyes of his generation. Sitting in his village, isolated from the wider world, he could not develop his view of the craft. Like all Jews of his time, he believed that craftsmanship was the lowest level for a human being.

98

He said that the craft distracts people's minds from higher things and asked me if I still understood the linguistic style of the Gemara. I replied that we could do a test. I recited to him several pages of Gemara from the Talmud tractate "Kiddushin" with all the complicated intonations and explanations.

R'Aba-Vigder actually grabbed his head. He alternated between looking at me and his son, shrugging his shoulders, and smacking his lips. He just couldn't bring himself to believe that a worker could still somehow have a connection to the Gemara.
"Are you really going to continue being a craftsman?" he asked, more to himself than to me,
"No, I won't let you! I can't let you do that!"
"Why won't you let me?" I asked.
"Well, we'll find a way to make sure a guy like you doesn't fall victim to the trade...we'll think of something."

I was served tea and he went on and on about how I shouldn't be a craftsman. I looked at his boy, who had a conspicuous facial flaw: his upper lip was split. He didn't look like a gifted boy at all.
"What's the point of being gifted," I thought to myself, "as long as he's happy?"

99

When I got up to leave, I had to give R' Aba-Vigder my word that I would visit him again tomorrow.
"I don't know what he wants from me," I thought as I left.

But I kept my promise and went to see R' Aba-Vigder the next day, right after work.

He was even friendlier than the day before, talked to me for a long time, and even tested me a little. I showed him everything I could do, even my handwriting in Hebrew. And he was amazed by everything I showed him.

He called his youngest daughter, showed her my handwriting and said:
"Look, Brokhele, how a boy, a craftsman, writes for us Jews..."

He warmed and spoiled me so much with his friendship and joy that I cried...
"Calm down," he patted me on the shoulder, "if it's up to me, you won't be a craftsman anymore. I won't let that happen!"

He paced the room, waving his hands, shaking his head, tugging at his beard, and suddenly stopped and said:
"I have a plan: you will go to Volozhin with my son... You will both study there - and study well. And when you become a "mentsh" [a responsible or mature person], I will give you my daughter Brokhe as your wife...

100

You will have a respectable wife and a respectable life...do you understand what this plan is?"

He, a lively, charming man, looked into my eyes and my cheeks glowed with unknown feelings and deep thoughts.

I felt as if all this wasn't really happening, but a sweet dream.
"Don't think twice," he said, "throw the craft away at once and get on your way..."

I ran home with glowing cheeks and a hot head. The whole world swam in colored fire before my eyes, and [the words] kept coming back to me:
"You will take Brokhe as your bride... Brokhe as your bride... Brokhe as your bride..."
Early the next morning I told Moyshe the whole story and informed him that I was going to quit my job and go to Volozhin with R' Aba-Vigder's son.

But Moyshe didn't like the whole thing. He looked at me with evil, pointed eyes and began to shout:
"What do you mean, you're quitting the work? You agreed to do it, why are you stopping? The world is not without laws and rules, comrade! You have to finish the work you started".

101

Seeing that his shouting was of no avail, he adopted a softer tone. He began to speak quietly, without loud words, even warmly: "You fool, tell me yourself, what do you think Volozhin is good for? What will you get out of your studies? You can make a good living from your work. From Volozhin you can become a Jewish scholar, a pious but impractical person, a no-hoper, a good-for-nothing - not a solid person.
If you are fresh and healthy, you must be stupid to throw away a valuable job in the middle of it and go to Volozhin to join the pious, impractical people... Do you know what you are doing? You'll tear your hair out afterwards! I didn't know you were such a crazy boy...".

But his words didn't move me. I only listened with one ear. My heart was filled with R' Aba-Vigder, with Volozhik, with Brokhe...

Finally I said categorically:
"You cannot dissuade me. Your speeches and objections are in vain. I'm going to Volozhin".

"So you're going to Volozhin," Moyshe bowed, "well, then we'll see how you do."

He ran angrily out of the house and to the aristocrat. He told the aristocrat that he was losing his woodcarver because Aba-Vigder, the tenant, had persuaded him to go to Volozhin to study.

An aristocrat is still an aristocrat.

102

At that time, however, his power was almost unlimited. He did not submit to the law, but the law submitted to him. Milevski immediately told R' Aba-Vigder that if he took me away from my work, he would throw him out of the inn.

When I went to see R' Aba-Vigder, he was running madly around the room, waving his hands, banging on the table and shouting to his wife and children that as far as he was concerned, the whole inn should sink into the ground as long as the children were going to Volozhin.

"Surely it's reasonable for the children to go to Volozhin? Who can forbid me to do something sensible? Why should I obey a mad count? Where is it written that I must obey him? And if he threatens me with the inn, let the whole inn sink into the ground! May it be sacrificed for us and for all good Jews!

I saw his wife wringing her hands and the children hanging their heads. Despair was on everyone's face. I plucked up courage and said that I would not allow such a great source of income as the inn to be lost because of me. With tears in my eyes, I tore myself away from R' Aba-Vigder's house and ran to the aristocrat.

With great humility I told the satrap [a kind of governor] that I would return to my work.

103

And I also agreed that my foot would no longer cross the threshold of R' Aba-Vigder's house.
"And you will work honestly, like before?" the satrap asked me.
"As before," I nodded my head.
The aristocrat's anger immediately subsided.
The whole fever disappeared.

[1] archaic language of the old translations of Jewish books into Yiddish
[2] kidesh= Blessing, here it also has the meaning of a get-together on Shabbat for a happy occasion

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Chapter XI

My new devotion to study. - My mother harvests the pleasure. - Her big business. - The Mayne-loshn and the handkerchief. - The difference in studying. - Between two extremes. - R' Khonan Luliker. - A house of Torah and Haskalah. - The influence of Vilna on the surrounding Jewish villagers. - A guest at my brother's. - New wanderings.

But the thought of studying wouldn't let me go. It burned in me like a candle lit by R' Aba-Vigder. I told myself I had to study. And at dawn I took my tefillin bag and walked secretly to Lyubtsh.

In Lyubtsh I sat down in the bes-hamedresh [house of study] and dedicated myself to the Gemara with great devotion. I don't know where this zeal and passion came from. I drank the Gemara like a thirsty person drinks fresh, cool spring water.
When my mother noticed my zeal, she became the happiest mother in the world.

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She supported me with everything good and didn't know what to do with me.

Finally, in the month of Elul, her business was going very well. The famous "bes-oylem-yarid" [cemetery bustle] began. The women of the shtetl would spend whole days in the cemetery. They visited their fathers and mothers, children, brothers and sisters, relatives and good friends. They wept and poured out their bitter hearts before them, asking them to work successfully from there for a better destiny and an easier life for the living on this earth [1] . All the graves were occupied by women, and the voices of the women echoed far across the cemetery, like the waves of a river during a flood.

My mother walked among the graves, holding the "Mayne-loshn" [Maane Lashon with cemetery prayers] in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. It was her "yarid", her world.

Copper coins would fall into her handkerchief depending on how many women she was saying prayers and supplications with. When she came home from the cemetery in the evening, dead tired, she could hardly carry her handkerchief with the coins in it. It was too heavy a burden for her, but she was happy to carry it.

At home, she threw the handkerchief with the money on the table, and the big "zekser" [Russian 6-kopek coin] and the even bigger "tsener" [10-unit money] danced before her eyes.

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"I've toiled enough," my mother used to say, catching her breath and wiping the sweat from her face, "the whole shtetl has been to the 'holy place' [cemetery]...".

She looked at me with good, faithful eyes. She knew that I was studying, and above all - that I wanted to study! Now I could have anything from her. She even had a suit and an overcoat made for me and always said:
"Study, study, and you won't want for anything...".

And I really studied. There was a big difference between how I studied as a child and how I study now. Back then, studying was purely mechanical. I didn't have to understand what I was learning. I just had to recite a little bit of Gemara by heart and nothing more. That was the whole art and the whole game.

But now the mechanics had been thrown aside by my memory, and in its place had come the mind, which wanted to understand and grasp the matter.

This gave the whole learning process a very special flavor and meaning. I was no longer bored when I immersed myself in the Talmud for hours on end. On the contrary, the Talmud held me like a pair of iron pliers. I couldn't tear myself away from it.

I didn't study in a rush and in a hurry as in my childhood, but I concentrated on each subject with calm, slowness, understanding and moderation.

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I read "Rashi", "Tosafot", "Maharsha" and other commentators and investigated everything seriously and thoroughly.

When I had studied in this way for some time, I began to think of Volozhin with its great university of Jewish knowledge. And now, when I was ready to leave, a friend burst in and told me that a rich Jew from a village was looking for a teacher for his children.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in the job?" the friend asked me. "It's certainly not bad with the village Jew."

What was remarkable was that every time I decided to take a job, an opportunity to study presented itself. And vice versa, when I wanted to study, the opportunity to earn money arose at the same time. And I was constantly caught between the two extremes that kept tugging at my sleeve - one here, the other there...

Soon I introduced myself to the village Jew who was looking for a teacher. R' Khonan Luliker, as he was called, was a Jewish scholar and a "maskil" [Jewish enlightener]. He made a very good impression on me from the very first words. I accepted the position without a trace of doubt, feeling that I was more like a student to a rabbi [teacher] than a rabbi [teacher] to his students.

Our arrangements were very simple: R' Khonan gave me forty rubles for one semester, including room and board.

Satisfied, I moved to Luliki.

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But my satisfaction increased tenfold when I got to know R' Khonan's house. It was a beautiful Jewish house, where the teachings of the Torah did not banish the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment movement], and the Haskalah did not banish the Torah.
I saw there a beautiful "Shas" [abbreviation, six sections of Mishnah and Talmud] and other Talmudic books, but I also saw all the works of [Abraham] Mapu, the songs of Adam Hakohen Lebenzon, and other Hebrew poets and writers of that time.
I devoted myself to them with all the enthusiasm of my young soul.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned intelligent tenants. Now I would like to say something about the village Jews.
It is remarkable that the village Jews who lived near Vilna - a real Jewish city, or the Jerusalem of Lithuania - were all characterized by great ignorance and rudeness. Sometimes they were even people without any moral discipline. The great city of Vilna, with its sources of Torah and Haskalah, apparently had no influence on them.

On the contrary, the Jewish settlements of Novogrodok and the surrounding shtetlekh were populated mainly by Jewish scholars and scientists, who even had a sense of Haskalah.
The influence of Vilna was more pronounced among them than among the village Jews who lived near the "Jerusalem of Lithuania".

In R' Khonan's house, for the first time in my life, I came into contact with the best Jewish poets and thinkers, and for the first time I felt the attraction of a new kind of word. And indeed, it turned out that I was more of a student than a rabbi [teacher].

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R' Khonan's house was an excellent school for me. Here I changed and improved not only inwardly but also outwardly: I became calmer, more serene, more thoughtful.

The winter passed strangely quickly. I hardly noticed it. This alone is the best proof that I had a good, easy winter. Only beautiful, sweet, quiet days remain in my memory...

The snow began to melt. The dark winter clouds opened and a triumphant sun broke through. It brought the sweet news of spring. The sparrows began to build their nests with a great hullabaloo and joyful cries...

I received a letter from my brother asking me to come to him for Passover. I accepted his invitation and went to see my brother in Kene.
There I received a very warm welcome. Everyone noticed my change.

"He has become a very mature person," they said of me.
The story of the horse was forgotten. My sister-in-law was kind to me. In her eyes, I was now a teacher who earned his own living, and for my sister-in-law, that was the highest praise for a human being.

After Passover, destiny threw me to the village of Shudvinove, between Vilna and Landvarove. There I had three students with R' Yitskhok-Leyb Shudvinover.

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He was the tenant of the tavern that stood on the Landvarover highway. And I had two other students at the Jewish cobbler's in the village.

In a wink, I spent a happy summer in Shudvinove. When I was not looking at a religious book, I walked a lot and drank like wine the sweet summer air of the fields and forests of Shudvinove.

The daughters of R' Yitskhok-Leyb were sometimes joined by young boys and girls from the surrounding settlements. Then they talked, as young girls and boys do, or danced and sang, or played "Fantn" [an old children's game].

For three months I was fed by R' Yitskhok-Leyb, and for the remaining two months by the cobbler.

The cobbler had been a soldier in Nikolayevski and spoke with a hard "r". He used to tell stories about his "Nikolayevski military service".
"Underrrstand me, the commanderrr used to come and yell: 'Smirrrno'! [Attention]."

I must say that the poor cobbler fed his teacher better than Yiskhok-Leyb, the tavern keeper. Although he was an uneducated man himself, he had great respect for knowledge, for "the black points" [letters]. Apart from the fact that he paid me to teach him, I saw in his eyes a deep gratitude that I was teaching his child, as if I had done him a great favor for nothing.

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I was very fond of this simple Jew, and I remember him fondly in these pages of my memoirs.

So the summer disappeared with simple lessons with children, among fields and forests and naive boys and girls who talked romantically, danced or played "Fantn"...
On Sukes [Sukkot] I visited my brother again. Oh, I would advise everyone to visit someone, even a biological brother. But not with an empty pocket, nor with the "nose out" of a person looking for favors and walking around without a job. As soon as the best guest crosses the threshold with empty pockets, he loses some, if not all, of his prestige. That's the hard way of life.

However, I had begun to come to my brother's house as an independent person, and each time I was better received. I have no intention, God forbid, of insulting my dear, good brother. I merely wish to state a fact that was characteristic of human relations and the customs of our life.

"Well, Meirl," said my sister-in-law, "what news, how are you?"

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"Very good," I replied, "I earn my living and don't have to ask people for support.
"Well, that's really very good," my sister-in-law rejoiced, and my brother added:
"You see, Meir, when you talk like that, you're a 'mentsh'...".

[1] In Judaism, forms of "necromancy" are strictly forbidden. However, in their desperation, people have sought ways to ask the deceased, especially tzadikim, to put in a good word with God to improve their situation, in other words, to act as a sort of intermediary.

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Chapter XII

In R' Leyb Segal's liquor cellar. - Nachumzon. - In Vilkishok. - Opinions of village experts about a teacher. - A house with good people. - An experience with a Jew who was about to be lynched. - Nachumzon's speech to the peasants. - My students. - Eydl, Nachumzon's daughter. - A love in the manner of "Ahavat Zion". - We swear eternal love.- Nachumzon is my opponent.- Eydl leaves.- The faithful good mother.

When I went to Vilna after Sukkot with the idea of perhaps settling there, I visited R' Leyb Segal in his liquor cellar, as was customary. R' Leyb sat in his cool cellar, which was saturated with the pungent smell of alcohol, and struck up a conversation with me.
I told him that I was looking for a job, a position [as a teacher]. A new semester was starting. Of course, for a busy person like me, now was the best time to get organized.
"Well, certainly, certainly," R' Leyb agreed, "now is indeed the right time. There will probably be some kind of position, don't you think?"

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As I was about to leave, a tall, broad-shouldered Jew with a long black beard and sharp, black, glowing eyes suddenly came down into the cellar. It was a figure that immediately attracted everyone's attention.

"Oh, there's a guest!" R' Leyb rose from his seat and greeted him with a broad, cheerful 'sholem-aleykhem'.
"How are you, R' Yitskhok? How is business? What's new? Have you been in Vilna long?"
The Jew with the black beard smiled calmly and answered quietly:
"There is nothing new, R' Leyb. What is today was yesterday, the day before yesterday, and a whole year before that. Well, we live in this world and God is our Father. But there is one thing, my children are growing up and they need a teacher. That's why I came here to Vilna."

"You need a teacher?" R' Leyb Segal broached the subject again. "You see, R' Yitskhok, you are lucky, because you don't have to look for one at all. Right there in the cellar is an excellent teacher and an honest young man. I know him. You can make a deal with him here and now."

The tall Jew looked at me with his sharp, glowing eyes. R' Leyb introduced us and spoke to me like a good, skillful broker:
"You see, this is R' Yitskhok Nachumzon, a good, fine Jew, happy to know him... he is a tenant, a forest merchant... a generous Jew...

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...you won't find a better position in the whole world than with R' Yitskhok. Don't think twice, this business is truly heavenly!"

We didn't want to think about it for long. We both talked briefly about the conditions, discussed the costs for one semester, and signed the contract with a handshake.

And R' Leyb nodded his head happily: "Good luck! Good luck!" he laughed, "In my cellar you will not only get a good 'nineties' spirit, but also a nice boss and a good teacher. What kind of commission will I get from you now, huh?"

The Jew with the black beard laughed out loud. He said:
"Well, R' Leyb, if it is really the commission you are after, you cannot scare me with that. We are not afraid of such things."

"I know, I know, you have a generous hand," said R' Leyb good-naturedly, "you are even good to joke with."

That evening we left on Nachumzon's cart for Vilkishok. That was the name of my new employer's village.

We drove along strange back roads, uphill and downhill, shaking our bones and bumping our sides.

It wasn't until five in the morning that we arrived in Vilkishok, a village far from any highway.

I went straight to bed.
In a village you get up early. The women got up almost at dawn and started shredding cabbage. I heard people talking about me, judging me, and everyone - the baleboste [my boss's wife], the daughters, and the housemaids - gave their expert opinion of me. Unfortunately, the village teacher was so "lucky" that the last Jewish woman in the house also gave her weighty opinion of him...

By the way, I didn't listen to much of their assessments because I fell asleep right away.

I quickly introduced myself to all the members of the household. Yitskhok Nachumzon had three sons and two daughters. It could be said that it was a house of good and pleasant people, unlike any other. Nachumzon, his wife, and his children were good. The most common human trait, wickedness, was completely unknown to them. It was a warm house, a warm house even for a complete stranger. If someone had to start his career as a teacher in a village today, I would wish that he would end up in a house like Nachumzon's.
The only pity is that I don't think there is such a cozy house or such a familiar home anywhere today.

Yitskhok himself was a very simple Jew, an illiterate in the truest sense of the word.

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He could not sign his name. The "little black dots" [letters] were a mystery to him, a secret. However, this did not prevent him from holding his head higher than his peers. He was a very intelligent, capable, and enterprising man, and he led a very beautiful and extensive life.

In his youth he was an assistant and his wife a cook for a rich village Jew, who later decided that it would be right for them to marry. With luck, a wedding was arranged, and then the young couple, wanting to start their own business, rented a tavern. After a short time, they were able to make a good living from the tavern, as it was run by experienced and skilled hands.

The landowner Zelenski, who owned the tavern, noticed that his tenant was an exceptionally clever and capable Jew and began to work with him on a regular basis. He gave him various opportunities to earn money, and eventually made him his "court Jew".
Nachumzon obtained money for the landowner when he needed it, ran his business, gave him advice, and the landowner had great trust in him. In my opinion, this trust was never broken, because Nachumzon was not the kind of person who could fool or deceive anyone.

The kindness of Nachumzon and his household had spread far and wide, embracing even the most distant relatives who needed his help.

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Various people, relatives, friends, acquaintances, or complete strangers, always came to him to ask for material help, and he had never refused anyone. Both he and his wife were unaccustomed to closing their hands to others, to being stingy and dismissive.

The following episode is connected with Nachumzon. A poor merchant from the village often visited him. He used to carry and bring some products and sell them to the peasants. He made a miserable living.

One winter, when there was a severe frost, he traveled to Vilkishok and, as usual, stopped at Nachumzon's with his horse and cart and the few goods he had. After eating and spending the night there, he got up very early and went to the village. He stopped in front of a peasant's house, got out of the cart, took some goods, and entered the peasant's house.

He spent some time with the peasant, showed him his goods, persuaded him to make a deal, haggled with him, and went out again.
But he could not find his goods, which were his only possessions, in his cart. It had been stolen.
The Jew became confused and flew into a rage. He grabbed a bottle of kerosene, poured it over the farmer's house and set it on fire...

That's all a village needs. Panic broke out immediately. People were screaming:

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"There is a fire!"
And the Jew was seized.
The peasants wanted to lynch him.
They attacked him with cudgels and sticks. Someone tied his hands and feet. Someone shouted that he should be taken like this to the "stanovoy pristav" [office of the police commissioner]. A mob gathered around him, screaming, shouting and beating him across the village street...

At that moment, Nachumzon came running up. He pushed his way through the mob and started shouting that people should listen to him. He had something to say. The crowd stopped rocking. The mob fell silent. Nachumzon delivered a scathing sermon that ended in something like this:

"The Jew has committed a sin, but he has also been sinned against: you have stolen the last bit of what he, the poor man, possessed. He may have committed the greater sin, but first, it was a result of the sin you committed against him, and second, you have already punished him enough.
Just look at the way he looks!
Besides, are all those who have committed a crime really punished? For example, you, Ivan, stole a horse and got away with it. You, Stephan, drank a poor widow's money and still haven't returned it to her - and no one has arrested you. And you, Adrakhim, you really set fire to a house, everyone knows that, and yet no one sees you in prison...

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So why are you so focused on this Jew today?"
"Vyerno [right]!" cried the peasants, "vyerno! He speaks rightly! He is right! Vyerno!"

"Now that it is vyerno," Nachumzon turned to the mob, sinking his hand into his deep breast pocket, "since it is admitted that a mistake was made, I will give those present fifty rubles, two buckets of brandy, and ten buckets of beer. Have a party, let off steam, and leave the Jew to me...".

He took a fifty-rouble note from his breast pocket and waved it in the air.
That's how he saved a Jew from certain death. It must be said that one never noticed that he was illiterate, considering his innate intellect and tact...

He always behaved very well, never making mistakes in his choice of words and concepts, which is so characteristic of any uneducated person. He was made of such dough that he needed no education or training at all.

I felt at home in that house. Just like my parents. There was no difference between me and the other children, as if I were their child too.
I taught Nachumzon's two boys, Yenkele and Meirke, both very bright and capable children. It was a real pleasure to teach them. Yenkele went on to become a respected forest merchant.

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He had great business skills. Meirke was involved in the revolution...
He became one of the most capable fighters who overthrew the Tsarist regime, and today he is a respected commissar in the SSSR [USSR].

I spent my free time with Eydl, Nachumzon's daughter, a beautiful, graceful girl of seventeen. She received a good education at home, spoke Polish and Russian not badly, and a little Hebrew.
On Shabbat and holidays, boys and girls from the surrounding settlements usually came to play, sing, and dance together, as was customary in the village.
But since no boys came during the week, I became her cavalier. We walked through the fields, talked and chatted, and I often read "Ahavat Zion" [Love of Zion, A. Mapu's first novel written in Hebrew] with her.

The girl was fascinated by the novel. Something like a hot air from the land of Israel had hit her young, graceful face. The fiery oriental love of Amnon and Tamar had confused her thoughts.

She imagined that she was Tamar, the beautiful, dear, sweet Tamar of "Ahavat Zion". But she was missing an Amnon. Finally she realized that maybe I could be the Amnon...
So we both started dreaming, whispering, not really knowing what we were talking about...

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Something began to weave between us in the silence, beyond our understanding, but we were ashamed to talk about it.
Once I sent her a note asking her to come to me. But she didn't come. So I sent her a second note saying:
"Am I no longer worth you sacrificing a few minutes for me?"
At that time she wrote on the back of the note:
"Not just a few minutes, but my whole life. I'll be right there.

Like a bomb, those words took my breath away. I was confused. The secret that had lain unconsciously in our minds had now come to the surface. I was trembling and couldn't believe my luck.

Eydl came to me and we often talked about our love. We spoke passionately, with fire, in a fancy language like in "Avahat Zion". We told each other that I was Amnon and she was Tamar, that we belonged together for all eternity, that we were the right ones, chosen by Heaven, and we swore in writing that no power in the world would destroy our flaming love...

When a secret is broken, it echoes far and wide, to places where it is allowed, but also to places where it is of no use at all. Eydl's mother was the first to find out. Being a good, warm-hearted woman, she empathized with us, and when that wasn't enough, she protected and shielded us with her maternal authority.

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She began to look at me as if I were her own child, taking care of my laundry and even darning my socks.
Nachumzon, on the other hand, had a completely different attitude, and rightly so, I think. I was still a very rough boy, and he couldn't see me as a person worthy of marrying his little daughter. He resisted this childish fantasy with his whole being.

Our whole romance played out according to the notes of "Avahat Zion". It had no serious basis. We copied something foreign and thought we were experiencing our own feelings. Meanwhile, however, there was great turmoil. I was young, but I understood very well that, apart from the "passionate love," the wedding party would be very good for me. A rich house, golden people, a good, beautiful girl. Perhaps the only thing that made me bitter toward Nachumzon was that he didn't want me to be his son-in-law. But I mistook this bitterness for "lovesickness"...

The whole thing took the form of a pretended love that fought with all its might against all its destroyers and schemers, just as it is described in cheap novels.

I often whispered to Eydl. And her good mother sent us happy, blessed glances from afar.

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We told ourselves that we were madly in love with each other and that our bond was eternal. It seemed to us that our love would grow stronger day by day, hour by hour.

Finally, however, Nachumzon became disgusted with the whole affair. He took his little daughter and sent her to Vilna.
"It has to stop," he argued, "I can't stand by and watch the children make fools of themselves.
"It's foolishness for you, but it's suffering for them," his wife objected.
"What suffering?" he waved his hand, "I wouldn't give a penny for the whole thing. You see, you look at it like a soft-hearted Jewess. But I see it differently. All I see is folly, childish fancy, as they say, and I can't give my approval to it either."

His good wife swallowed a tear regretfully and silently, and felt very sorry for the two young souls in love. Their evil fate had separated them so mercilessly that they would be consumed with longing for each other.

The only role in this story that was not played according to the book, but truthfully, deeply and honestly, was the role of Eydl's mother.
She suffered so much for both of us.

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Chapter XIII

Eydl is in Vilna. - Yeshaya [Isayah] Herman. - A bride who does not want her bridegroom. - The daughter of the Kelmer Maggid. - A new plan. - I am going to Grodno. - Feyglzon. - The drive to study. - The famous fire in Grodno. - Sparks and flames. - A city disappears in the fire. - On the banks of the Neman. - In Kene. - The end of my hopes. - The first days of autumn. - Baranovski. - I am examined. - Baranovski's wife. - "Chayei Adam", "Chokhmat Adam", "Binat Adam" and "Pere Adam". - "Proshu ubiratsya otsyuda!". - I have done it. - Death and money.

At that time, when the city of Vilna was like a barrier between me and Eydl (this city always played a kind of fatal role in my youth!), the Nachumzons were visited by their nephew, whose name was Yeshaya Herman.

He was a decent, older fellow, a good teacher, but he gave the impression of being somewhat backward.

Everything outside the Gemara was foreign and almost unknown to him.
However, the family was very proud of his lineage and the Nachumzons were looking for a bride for him.

Yeshaya brought a certain calm to the "love turmoil" between me and Eydl.
He was a new person, we became friends and often studied together. Learning brought us even closer. I knew that a bride was being sought for him, and he knew that I was experiencing a "great tragedy". Sometimes we talked about it in secret, and we always reassured each other.

Finally, the Nachumzons found him a bride, a very beautiful girl with a dowry of a thousand rubles. Yeshaya went around with his heart pounding. On Chanukah, the bride was invited to the Nachumzons' home. He, Yeshaya, was a teacher of Gemara, a "kloyznik" [person who devotes himself to religious study in seclusion], a student of Talmud, a person who was not familiar with worldly manners. He was afraid to meet a complete stranger...

The bride came to visit on Chanukah, and the people in the house took on a ceremonial, festive tone. Outwardly, things were cheerful and comfortable. The bride spoke to the bridegroom, and the bridegroom answered.
What could he, dear Yeshaya, do but answer?

The betrothal contract was happily written. People made jokes. Pots were [traditionally] broken.

But the bride was a modern girl. She was looking for a handsome man.

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She was looking for agility and dexterity. Unfortunately, poor Yeshaya lacked all of these. He could answer only when the bride spoke to him, and then only with a pounding heart.

The eight days of Chanukah passed in the confusion of the betrothal, in the daze of the betrothal in which I also participated. Then the bride left and sent back the engagement contract...

It wasn't even a big blow for Yeshaya. The girl with her modernity had put too much pressure on him, and now he could breathe more freely.
We returned to the Gemara, and life in Vilkishok went on as quietly as ever.

However, the matchmakers sensed a big bite, so they did not let go of either Yeshaya or Nachumzon, who played the role of "mekhutn" [close relative of the groom]. Yeshaya quickly became the bridegroom of the daughter of the famous Kelmer Maggid [Moses Isaac, Maggid of Kelme]. She was a girl who suited Yeshaya better than the first bride, and the wedding was set for the summer.

Since the Maggid of Kelme lived in Grodno at that time, Yeshaya was to go there as well. He announced his plan that I should also go with him to Grodno to study together. The purpose was to study for a year with all the passion I could muster, to receive my ordination as a rabbi, and thus to stop working in Nachumzon's house.

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A person with "smikhe" [ordination as a rabbi] could, from a general point of view, ask for Eydl's hand.

This plan appealed to me, and Yeshaya spoke formally to Nachumzon and his wife about the matter. Nachumzon immediately agreed. After all, being ordained as a rabbi was no small matter.
What's more, Nachumzon agreed to support me in Grodno at his own expense. We prepared for the trip, and I even thought that our romance, which began with "Ahavat Zion," would become a reality...

Since a teacher was needed to replace me, a person named "Feyglzon" was hired, a young boy from Krynki. The Nachumzons knew him from before. He would sometimes come to Vilkishok and we would spend time together.
But it could be dangerous for me to leave a young, talented boy, who also wrote beautiful Hebrew, in my place.

Eydl, who saw everything through Tamar's eyes, might have found him a better Amnon than I, and of course all my efforts would have been in vain, regardless of all their sacred oaths.
But I knew that Feyglzon had a bride, and that reassured me. In those days, people were not as lavish with brides as they are today.

Yeshaya traveled to Grodno over Passover to celebrate his marriage to Shulke, the daughter of the Kelmer Maggid.

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And I went to Yeshaya right after Passover. I was escorted out of the house like a true bridegroom: with linen, bedding, and other necessities. But most of all, with warm, heartfelt, sincere blessings.

I arrived safely in Grodno. There I was able to warm up under the wings of such great tzadikim as the Kelmer Maggid and the rabbi of Grodno, the famous R' Elikom, who had known my father and was somewhat related to us.

As soon as I settled down a bit, I began to study with all the energy I had at my disposal. Yeshaya, the young head of the family, did the same. We pushed each other to study. It was a kind of sport for us: which one of us would be ordained a rabbi faster?

I was young, healthy and carefree, my mind didn't have to worry about earning a living. The Nachumzons supported me in Grodno, and all I had to do was study, which still had a special appeal because it was linked to a secure career.

But every time I tried to study for my career, I failed. Some misfortune always came and destroyed all my plans. So it was this time.

After Yeshaya and I had been studying with great zeal for some time, the famous fire broke out in Grodno [1885] and turned the city into a pile of rubble.

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The fire had started in a neighborhood of wooden houses and spread throughout the city. It was like a roaring sea of flames and sparks. The wooden roofs and walls cracked and splintered under the licking tongues of fire.

The air glowed and trembled. Thick black smoke pierced the dancing sparks. The dancing sparks adorned the smoke like living gold...

The red fires of the conflagration were reflected in the wide-open, terrified eyes of the city's populace. The infernal noise and screams drowned out the cracking and crashing of the burning wood. Everyone seemed to be half or completely insane. People were dragging packages, objects and things out of the house, but of course without any sense or order. There were trampled cushions in the streets, torn bedspreads, broken tables, cupboards, lamps and clocks that had been left in the great fright when the fire broke out...

It was as if a red tornado had swept over the city with its whirling columnar footsteps.
I often heard the kind of desperate cries that can only be uttered in times of great disaster:
"Where is my son? My son, where is he?"
"Ma-ma! M-a-m-a!"

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"Dad, where are you?"
"Rakhele! Rakhele! Rakhele! Oh, woe is me!"...
"Where is my daughter?"
"I won't survive this!..."

Smeared with soot, sweaty, splattered, burned all over, Yeshaya and I toiled in the Kelmer Maggid's house. We were constantly dragging things to the banks of the Neman. We were dizzy, our temples were throbbing, our ears were ringing.

In the end, we fell down on the bank of the Neman, exhausted and tired, along with the entire population of the city. No one screamed anymore. What little strength a man has, together with the rags, was left in the city, in the fire and in the flames, and we breathed heavily like consumptives...

We spent several days and nights on the banks of the Neman, breathing in the smoke of the smoldering wood.
As I looked at the cool waters of the Neman, I thought with pain that in this fire I had lost my hope of my ordination, of Eydl, of joining the dear Nachumzon family...

All my sweet plans disappeared with the fire. The fire had devoured them like the rags of the poor neighborhoods.

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After the fire I could not stay in Grodno, and for psychological reasons the way to Vilishok was closed to me. There was already another teacher there, and I couldn't burst in claiming to be a future son-in-law. I could become a son-in-law only if I fulfilled a certain condition.

I did not fulfill the condition, and all the ties that bound me to the Nachumzons were severed.

Since I had no other choice, I went to my brother in Kene. By the way, the Days of Awe were approaching anyway.
I really sat with my brother as if after a catastrophic fire. As if my entire past had been burned away. From time to time, Feyglzon, who represented me in Vilkishok, would send me large letters written in an artificial, pseudo-biblical style. In these letters he lamented my "love" and consoled me that I would find happiness with another bride.

My mood was in harmony with the first days of autumn. Heavy clouds had arrived with cold, long, annoying rains. Kene lay in the mud. The trees often trembled with their yellow, slowly falling leaves...

And again we had to think of a "takhles", a job as a teacher.
Not far from Kene lived a rich forest merchant named Baranovski, who was looking for a teacher for his two children. This time my brother was the intermediary.

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He suggested that Baranovski hire me as a teacher.
Baranovski was one of those forest traders who understood little about the "black dots" [letters]. He was uneducated and afraid to rely on himself to make a decision.

"You know," he said to my brother, "I agree to take him as a teacher. But first I have to test him. When I buy a piece of merchandise, I have to touch it well first..."
"How are you going to test him?" asked my brother.
"Well, of course, I'm not familiar with that work... if I could, we'd be talking about other things," Baranovski said. "But I have a well-known Jew in Vilna who teaches very well. He will test your brother."

My brother insisted, and so I went to Vilna to meet the unknown examiner. But in Vilna [it turned out that] I even met my rival, who was also waiting for an answer [from Baranovski]. So it wasn't just a simple test, but a "competition".

During the questioning I immediately realized that my rival was better at teaching than I was, and that he actually had the right to take the position at Baranovski.
However, I was more skillful and agile than him, which was especially appreciated by my examiner.

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He said to me:
"You seem more energetic to me, so my opinion is for your benefit."

That was the end of the competition and I went to Baranovski's village.

The long winter nights had begun with the short rainy days. The village was dead, the trees had lost their leaves, the fields and paths had turned to black mush.

The Baranovskis were very rich people, but they were also very stingy people with cold hearts. The wife even surpassed her husband. She had truly immersed herself in the arithmetic of stinginess, and had reached such a level that she counted the innocent, dirt-cheap potato among the highest luxuries.

But since there was nothing cheaper than potatoes in our sinful world, she used them to feed herself, the teachers, the servants, and everyone else. In addition to all her inner qualities, "the Supreme Being" had blessed her with chronic rosacea on one cheek, which gave her a special charm.

She was of noble lineage, from the family of "Chayei Adam" [1] . On this occasion I remember an anecdote that circulated in my time in connection with the "Chayei Adam".

It is known that the master, "Chayei Adam", wrote four religious books:
"Chayei Adam" [The Life of Man], "Chokhmat Adam" [The Wisdom of Man], "Binat Adam" [The Intelligence of Man], and "Nishmat Adam" [The Soul of Man].

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Once his son, who was not particularly well-bred, had an argument with a young man in the yeshivah. The latter said to him:

"Surely the son of a Gaon, who is the author of five religious books, should be a little more refined and cultured than you!"
When he heard these words, the son of Chayei Adam became very angry:
"You ignoramus, don't you know that my father wrote four books, not five, as you are shouting! What a donkey's head you are!"
The young man laughed and asked:
"What, why four, so he's not the author of 'Pere-Adam' [2] ?"

As I finish this anecdote and move on to the Baranovskis, I must say that my hostess was unbearable. I walked around in a state of agitation, trying to figure out how to reckon with her. The potatoes were crawling out of my throat. I couldn't look at her anymore. Her name alone annoyed me to no end.

On top of that, she had a cursed tendency to come into my room, where I was studying with my pupils, and poke her nose into the lesson. Even here, in the only quiet corner, she would burst in with her chronic rosacea on her cheek and her potato-related opinions...

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I couldn't stand it any longer. And just as she came into the study room to poke her nose into the lesson, I jumped up from my seat, opened the door wide, and shouted in Russian in my loud tenor voice, which already had a good reputation:

"Proshu Ubiratsya Otsyuda!" [Please Get Out of Here!]
She immediately jumped out of the room as if scalded, and I slammed the door so loudly that the whole house shook.

Her husband wasn't home, and I heard her swearing at me and running around, threatening to throw me out when her husband returned.
Then her husband came and I heard her wailing, interspersed with curses and expletives. After a while I heard loud, shrill screams:
"We have taken a thief for a teacher, a scoundrel, a murderer, a bandit, a robber!...He almost killed me...I barely escaped with my life from his murderous hands. He must be thrown out at once, otherwise I won't be able to bear it!"

She cried and squealed, but her husband, who already knew her, paid little attention to her complaints. I heard him say to her in a pleased tone:
"Yes, I really like such a teacher.

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He's not a rag, he's a man. A rag shouldn't teach children."

He talked it all out with her until she fell silent. I could no longer hear her squealing.

Since then, everything in the house has changed. Potatoes disappeared and my eyes saw eggs, butter, cream, cheese and other good things on people's tables.

The woman with the chronic rosacea on her cheek now tiptoed in front of me, afraid of my gaze. I had done it. Yes, you can't be a rag, especially in such a rough house.

I had studied with Baranovski's children for a long time and had no more complaints against the landlady.
I didn't feel bad with them. Little by little we got used to each other. In my free time I used to go for walks, look at a religious book to study for myself, and play "Sixty-Six" [the card game] with Baranovski. The "stavke" [bet] was usually five kopecks...
Since my employer was very lucky, as a rich man should be, he often won and I often lost.
I remember that before I left, while we were "settling up", I owed him sixty kopecks for [lost] card games.

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He took it out of my salary. He remarked very seriously:
"If I had owed you sixty kopecks for the [lost] cards, I would have added it to your salary..."

As I said, he was a very thrifty and hard man, even though he already had about half a million gold rubles. His business grew enormously, as did his wealth. He often said.
"It is not so difficult to make money. But you have to keep it and not spend it... it's a great art".

In his middle years he moved to Vilna, where his fortune also grew. But he became seriously ill and bedridden. An acquaintance visited him and asked: "How are you, R' David?"
He replied: "Not well, my friend. I would have liked to die a millionaire..."
The acquaintance asked:
"Do you need much more to become a millionaire?"
Baranovski thought about it.
"Not much," he said, "about fifty thousand rubles, no more..."
And he added:

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"Understand that if you've been saving for a certain amount all your life, you don't want to close your eyes until you've reached that amount."

But he did not. His dream did not come true: he died in his middle years - and not as a millionaire...

[1] Chayei Adam= Pseudonym of Rabbi Avraham Danzig [1748-1820], who wrote four famous books of Jewish law. He was born in Danzig [Gdansk], Poland, but spent most of his life in Vilna.

[2] פרא אדם= Pere Adam, "wild man," a person who behaves aggressively and resembles a wild donkey. Of course, this is not really a "fifth book", but an ironic reference to the biblical prophecy in Genesis 16:12.

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Chapter XIV

The end of my book romance. - Eydl's wedding. - My draft. - Former military service. - Why didn't Jews want to do military service?. - They are looking for "sgules" for me. - My view of "myopia". - A death certificate or a "smertelne metrike". - The Sheluber operator. - The Meir Shleymovitsh covenant. - My inheritance. - I am in marriage negotiations. - "A girl like a diamond!" Beauty that makes an impression. - Bad gossip. - Dragoon officers. - A dialogue with my bride. - The end of the "shidekh". - An exaggerated finale. - Back to my brother in Kene.

Nachumzon didn't want me to marry his daughter. At first glance, it was clear that the whole matter depended on him and his will.
But he didn't want to - and he got his way. The good, gentle Eydl, who had sworn her love to me so ardently in the manner of "Ahavat Zion," married a young man from Vilna.
That's how simple and gray our book romance ended.

There is a Jewish principle that says you should accept everything as good. It was probably fate....I followed the principle and soon calmed down.

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Meanwhile, my draft date was approaching.

Among the Jews, military service was considered the greatest plague, and not without reason. The Jew who went into military service had the same feeling as if he were going to the gallows. It was not the service itself that was terrible, but the treatment of a Jewish soldier. The man in him was insulted and laughed at, his soul was broken. His religion and his God were mocked. The Jewish soldier was beaten, spat in the face, and subjected to the greatest moral torment.

But the Jewish soldier had to remain silent, he was not allowed to protest, he had to suffocate his pain deep in his soul.
He saw before him the bloodthirsty, drunken faces of the officers and the dull, indifferent, spiritless potato faces of the peasant soldiers. And he lived in constant fear and terror, because he saw no defense anywhere around him, nothing that could protect and shield him in the great, wild Tsarist forest of soldiers.

It wasn't for nothing that Jews allowed themselves to be mutilated, to be crippled for the rest of their lives, as long as they didn't have to do military service. I was also offered various remedies to keep me out of the army. For example, to take strong medicine to weaken my heart, or to cut a vein in my foot to make me limp, or to make one ear deaf, and so on.

But I didn't want to hear about it, because to have such "defects" means to be not far from the graveyard.
From my point of view, I had a natural defect:
A severe case of shortsightedness, so that no one would dare to take me as a soldier.

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But my dear brother thought differently. He thought that myopia was not a handicap at all, and certainly not from the Russian point of view. What Jew isn't short-sighted? And yet it never happened that he made a mistake in a calculation because of it...

It occurred to my brother that the best thing for me to do would be to get a death certificate, or as they called it in those days, a "smertelne metrike". The "kazyoner rov" [rabbi in Russia, paid by the government] issues such a certificate that a person has died suddenly. The person is then removed from the books and not called up for military service. The "suddenly deceased" later enrolls in a privileged family and thus wriggles out of military service...

This combination favored my brother.
"It's a sure thing," he argued.
In time, he took me to the small town of Shelub in the Minsk governorate. There was a kind of teacher who was a very important person in the town council, and he assured us that he would deliver a "smertelne metrike" to us easily and quickly.
"Understand, I will make it coherent, a walk here and a walk there, and you will soon have such a certificate, may we all live".

We paid the Jew seventy-five rubles and went home happy and satisfied.

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But the days of my draft were fast approaching, and there was no sign of a certificate. It wasn't going to work! My brother ran to Shelub worried.

"What are you doing, you're just a swindler," he attacked the teacher, "you took seventy-five rubles 'in blood money' and made a fool of us! You're a thief, a scoundrel! Where is the certificate? The draft is about to begin!"

The teacher calmly replied, "What a Jew! Why are you shouting? Even a child can shout. You'd better go to the Kovno governorate. There I have prepared the "smertelne metrike" and you'll find it there!"

My brother believed him again and went to Kovno, but no luck there either! It was clear that the Sheluber teacher was an impostor. Finally, after much effort, my brother managed to get a

death certificate in a shtetl. It was even sent immediately to the military commission. So, thank God, I died and was no longer on the list of recruits...

At the same time, a "staroste" [local headman] gave me a passport in the name of a "Meir Shleymovitsh [- Buris]" [1] who had left for America a long time ago...
I don't know who this Meir Shleymovitsh was, whether he was good or bad, rich or poor.

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But I had transformed myself into him with a clear conscience to protect myself from Tsarist military service. If this "Buris" is still alive today, I can assure him that although I bore his prestigious name, I tried not to disgrace him.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the money my brother had paid to the Sheluber operator, as well as all other expenses connected with my enlistment, were covered by my inheritance in Lyubtsh.
Our house in Lyubtsh had been sold for four hundred rubles, and I received half of this sum as my share...

In the old days, a boy who had already been called up for military service was one of those adults who had to think seriously about starting a family, a wife and children...

A "shadkhen" [matchmaker] burst in on me, a lively Jew, and began to tell me miracle after miracle about a girl who could be my bride. He showered me with rapid, gripping words, gesticulating with his hands and swaying like a palm branch.

"A girl like gold, a diamond, a jewel... a great beauty, such as there is only one in the country... a noble, stately woman... whoever sees her is truly amazed... moreover, a good and warm-hearted person... and no wonder: she comes from such a noble lineage, a family of pure silk and velvet... Well, and the dowry is also very respectable: eight hundred rubles! You can do a lot of business with that money."

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The Jew buried me and showered me with gripping words. From his mountain of words it crystallized that the girl, who came from the neighboring town of Ostrovits, belonged to a very nice family. Her father was a contractor for the local Dragoon regiment. He made a good living and ran a fine household.

The matchmaker talked to me, persuaded me, and convinced me. Finally, I went to Ostrovyets, where I met the bride. I must admit that the matchmaker didn't exaggerate at all. She was really a very beautiful, slim girl with soft lips and big dark eyes.

We walked together a few times and talked. I don't know if she was that smart, but she impressed me a lot with her beauty, her silvery voice, her attitude, her tact. After a short time we signed a first agreement for a wedding, which was planned for the time after "shvues" [Shavuot].

Understandably, I walked around as if in a dream. The hopes really threw me off balance. I would be released from my hard breadwinning, teaching, and become a contractor. My business would grow with my skills, with my name, with my wealth...

There was only one drawback: there were some public rumors about my bride. It was said that she hung around with Dragoon officers. But I couldn't believe it –

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because of her tact and her beautiful attitude. Besides, I knew that it was enough for a Jewish daughter in a small shtetl to say a few words to an officer in order to blacken her and slander her with the worst rumors.

"People talk silly things," I thought, "let them talk. But my bride is so lovely, a beauty...".
My brother invited my bride for the first days of Passover. My bride visited my brother, and it seemed to us that it had become brighter and warmer in Kene. Everyone felt the effect of her beauty. The girl was radiant, glowing, and everything that came in contact with her seemed to light up as well.

The first days of Passover passed like a dream. My bride was preparing to return. Since I was invited to Ostrovyets for the other days of Passover, I left with my bride. These were my first sweet days as a bridegroom, and the thought that I would be able to spend some more time with the bride made me very happy.

When we arrived in Ostrovyets, I rested a little in the manner of a bridegroom, walking around and humming with joy and pleasure.
But in the evening, my bride suddenly dressed herself up as if she'd just come out of an egg. She put on the most beautiful dress she had and looked at herself in the mirror for a long time.

"Are you going somewhere?" I asked her.

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"Yes, I have to go away."
"Where to?"
"To the regiment..."
"To the regiment?"
"Well, yes. Why do you ask?"
"What do you have to do at the regiment?"

She smoothed her hair with her fingers and answered:
"I have to settle something with the officers...it's an order..."
"And no one else can take your place? Only you can go to the officers?" I asked her in a sharp tone.
"Who will represent me there? What are you talking about?" she replied, smiling in a way that stabbed me in the heart.
She left and didn't return until late in the evening.

It was now clear to me that even slander can hide a great truth. My bride had been slandered in the shtetl. I hadn't believed the evil, envious tongues. But that night I confirmed what they had said. Maybe I wasn't right, maybe she really had gone to calculate something about a military order. After all, she could do it better than anyone else.

But I was excited, and my thoughts had been led in a completely different direction.

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I made a hard and harsh decision:
"Call it off, break up, run away from here."

The next day I said goodbye to my bride and her family. They didn't even want to let me go, they persuaded me to stay for the other Passover days, but I pressed my lips together and tore myself away from these people...
I went to my brother in Kene. Of course, there was hardly any talk of my "shidekh" [match].

The finale with my Ostrovyets bride was a bit overdone. And above all - not Jewish. I don't know what happened to that girl. Every time I thought of her, I immediately saw that evening when she was dressed in her most beautiful dress, looking in the mirror, smoothing her hair with her fingers...
"Where are you going?"
"To the regiment."
But one thing must be admitted: she was a very beautiful, charming girl.

[1] מאיר שליימאָוויטש בוריס

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Chapter XV

No longer a teacher, but a subagent. - A bit of philosophy because of little things and coincidences. - Trying my luck. - Forging someone else's name. - Two letters. - My trip to Vilna - R' Shmuel Natanzon. - One realizes that I am the groom. - My first meeting with the bride. - The impression. - The conversation with the bride. - This is a fateful thing. - An unexpected trip to Nementsin. - The people of the shtetl. - Again the bride and her mother. - I am not allowed to show myself in the shtetl. - My annoyance. - A generous Jew. - Calm thoughts on the eve of Shabbat.

I was living with my brother in Kene and no longer thought of "a position." I had changed from being a teacher to an insurance agent and was earning well. I wanted to be self-employed and try my skills in a new field.
A brother of my sister-in-law lived in Kene at that time. He was a very simple boy, but a very kind and natural person.

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In the middle of the Passover holidays, he had gone to Nementsin [Nemenčinė], a shtetl on the Vilye River, to meet his bride, and, as you wouldn't wish on a man, he came back with nothing, because the girl didn't like him.

However, he returned with a suitable match for me.
"You, listen to me," he said to me, "I saw a relative of my 'bride' there, a very decent and intelligent girl, but not a great beauty... You're not looking for a beauty, but a sensible match, and I think she's just right for you... But you'll have to hurry, because they've already told her about a guy from Vilna...".

Sometimes a serious matter begins with a small thing, a coincidence. It was the same in this case. My sister-in-law's brother saw a girl passing by in the shtetl, and it occurred to him that she would be a suitable bride for me. This coincidence later turned into a serious relationship that would last a lifetime...

I quickly took his words seriously and began to make inquiries about her. At the same time, I tried my luck: I wrote two letters in the name of the relative of the girl from Nementsin, who was our acquaintance. I sent one letter to the girl's mother and the other to her brother-in-law, R' Shmuel Natanzon, who lived in Vilna.

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In the first letter I proposed a match with me in the language and style of her relative; in the second I proposed myself, describing myself, of course, without exaggeration, as is proper in such a case. I asked them to reply immediately to the address of my sister-in-law's brother...

A few days later two letters arrived - one from Vilna, the other from Nementsin. One for the "relative", the other for me. The letter from Vilna was not so important, but the letter to the "relative" was very interesting and had an intimate character. In it, the "relative" was asked to prepare the marriage arrangements, and it was frankly explained to her that no more than four hundred rubles could be given as a dowry, and that this sum would be available only after the house had been sold.

Strangely enough, I was very impressed by this match, although she was far from being a "shmaltsgrub," as people usually call a bride with a fat dowry.

Since we took this matter seriously, we finally brought the relative (she lived in a neighboring shtetl) to Kene and told her the whole story of the matchmaking. We confessed that we had gone so far as to falsely write under her name, a thing that smacks of prison...

The woman laughed good-naturedly. Finally, it was decided that she should write to the Nementsin girl and prepare the marriage contract.

And she did. We quickly arranged a meeting in Novovileysk to get to know each other. For some reason, however, I wanted to postpone the meeting until a few weeks later, so I even went to Vilna.

I visited R' Shmuel Natanzon and told him that I was a messenger of the groom to whom his sister-in-law was to be married, and that the groom actually wanted to postpone the meeting until a few weeks later.

R'Shmuel looked at me sharply. Then he led me out into the yard, as if it were some kind of conspiracy. He looked at me sharply again and asked:
"Tell the truth, you are the bridegroom, aren't you?"
His sharp look penetrated me completely. I couldn't deny it.
"Yes," I said, "I am indeed the groom..."

R' Shmuel smiled.
"See, I knew it right away," he said. "Now we can really talk like good friends, so let's go back to the house first."

A conversation developed about the Torah, interpretations, philosophies. He obviously wanted to question me, test me, examine me, interrogate me, test my knowledge and expertise in detail. And of course I tried to appeal to him with my expertise from my studies, as is customary in such a case. Finally he asked:
"Why do you want to postpone the matter?

The day you are supposed to meet the bride in Novovileysk is already set, isn't it?"
I replied with a kind of excuse. But he objected sharply:
"An agreement is an agreement! One must be precise in such matters. It's the way of the world since time immemorial. You have to put everything else aside and come at the right time. After all, the girl is worth being on time for."

In the end, I had to give in. He was really right. A day had just been set for the meeting I had agreed to, so I couldn't change it later.

I went to Novovileysk alone, because my brother and sister-in-law were busy. But the bride arrived with a whole entourage. Her mother came, her sister, her brother, her brother-in-law, and others. We stopped at an inn where we had breakfast and tea and talked "oyf mevines" [critically].
After all, it was a day for getting to know each other, and we both needed to take a good look at each other.

As is customary in such cases, it was suggested that the bride and I go for a walk. It was a lovely summer evening. We walked slowly through the streets of the shtetl, looking into each other's eyes, talking, chatting, telling stories, but without mentioning the main thing.

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We avoided the tricky subjects of money and dowries... I realized that her financial situation was not good, and she had probably realized that I was anything but a Rothschild.
But if you didn't pay attention to money and didn't take the material situation into account, the marriage was a very good match, just as I had wanted.

I liked the girl's intelligence and her natural attitude.

We left the narrow streets and went out into the open fields. A warm wind, filled with the spicy smell of the fields, brushed my face. The moon was rising, casting a fresh silvery light into the still evening darkness.

The conversation between me and the girl continued in a determined manner, and in this safety even some tricky subjects were touched upon... What we had not been able to mention before was now openly spoken. We talked about money, about the situation...

But this did not scare us. A strong confidence in the future brought us closer and closer, as if we had known each other for years. It was a remarkable couple who went for a walk on a moonlit night, and it was during this walk that they determined the destiny of their future lives.

Between me and the bride there were quiet and thoughtful words like:
"W e don't need much... w e don't think of great riches... w e don't want a palace.

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We only ask God for a quiet, honest life, it should be, as they say, 'bread to eat and clothes to wear'...
We are two young, sober people. We want to work, we want to go hand in hand, and God will certainly not abandon us...".

I said a very fond farewell to my bride and her family and headed back to Kene. I drove with the thought that I had found my destiny wife and considered myself a bridegroom who would soon be under the chuppah.

In Kene, I gave a positive report about my bride and her family.
"Does that mean you're happy?" my brother asked me.
"Well, I'm certainly happy," I replied.

Wanting to get to know my bride and her family better, I decided to go to Nementsin. I didn't need to make long preparations. Besides, the matter was too serious and urgent.

I went there one Shabbat. Nementsin is a small shtetl on a high hill on the banks of the Vilye. On one side is the forest, on the other the river with a beautiful tributary, the Nementse. An excellent landscape. The whole village gives the impression of a holiday resort. The eye constantly sees a large number of shades of green and fast-flowing water.

At that time there was a Jewish population of 150 families in Nementsin.

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They traded in grain, flax, haberdashery, manufacturing, and the like. There were many wealthy citizens who led a good life and were able to study well. In general, Nementsin was one of the once prosperous Jewish shtetls.

If you wanted to go to Nementsin, you had to take a ferry across the Vilye River. There, on the first side, R' Yitskhok Riman, my bride's brother, ran a tavern. When he saw the guest, he was very surprised.
"Why so suddenly?" he asked me. "We're not prepared for you, because you didn't tell us."
There was a little commotion in the tavern. People were whispering:
"The groom has arrived unexpectedly!..."
Maybe it wasn't very tactful on my part. But I had deliberately wanted to come unexpectedly, so that I could see everything and everyone in a natural, unprepared state.

R' Yitskhok immediately announced in the shtetl that the bridegroom had arrived, and within a few hours the bride and her mother had gathered in the tavern. My bride wore a simple chintz dress, as if to emphasize her simplicity and naturalness.

My bride's mother made it clear to me that I had to stay in the tavern on the Sabbath and not in the shtetl.

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"It's not appropriate," she said, "but we all want to spend Shabbat in the tavern instead... "

I must honestly admit that I was very upset by this. I was a good reciter at the "omed" [podium] and a good prayer leader, and I had intended to make a great impression in the shtetl, to daven the additional "Musef" prayer and read the "Haftoyre" [Haftorah], so that I would give my bride pleasure when she heard me praised:
"What a talented bridegroom!"

But my bride's mother thought that I shouldn't show my face in the shtetl because it wasn't appropriate. And of course I had to agree with her, although I was very sorry.

Later, after they had left, a tall, heavy, elderly Jew came into the tavern and, in his "Sholem Aleykhem" greeting, extended his hand to me so widely that it's a miracle I still have my thumb, for otherwise he would have grabbed my whole arm up to the elbow. This was R' Yitskhok Riman's father-in-law. He turned a pair of large, agile eyes on me and asked me harshly:

"Well, R' Meir, why have you come now, when it is neither the right month nor the right Shabbat for the "tnoim" [engagement contract] and the wedding, the table has not been prepared and the bathroom has not been heated?"

I looked at this Jew:

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It was impertinent of a person to approach a stranger in that manner, with that tone, and with that question.

Nevertheless, I replied with a quote from Ecclesiastes and a little sophistry, so that he nodded his head in satisfaction.

"Well, never mind," he said, "sometimes a bridegroom has to come in a hurry. He must come unexpectedly. I have nothing against you. To have come is to have come. My only concern was to ask. Every problem must have its solution, every question must have its answer.
So... so..."
He left with heavy steps.

A red sun began to set. Red spots trembled on the green waters of the Vilye. The wide fields were shrouded in a dark mist, and the shtetl on the hill looked out of its windows demurely at the evening sky in anticipation of Shabbat.

What a sweet stillness, what a clear silence had fallen over the land around Nementsin. As I listened to this silence, I thought that there, in the shtetl, I had found my destiny.

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Chapter XVI

A story about dowry. - A conversation with the bride's mother. - The colonial shop in Vilna. - My wedding. - The top hat with the black "surtuk". - How to get rich by following the advice of the Nementsin landowner. - Missed the train. - My sister-in-law's moral lecture. - The pleasure of having my own little corner. - The first Shabbat. - The first loan from a moneylender. - Amnon and Tamar again, but without the poetry of "Avahat Zion". - The end of the Vilkishoker idyll. - We sold our shop. - The bitter taste of unemployment. - "You don't miss teaching and dying!" - The plan because of America. - America and "agunes".

In order to deposit the promised dowry and cover the costs of the wedding, the tavern at Nementsin, where I had stopped, had to be sold. The tavern and the land were part of my bride's inheritance. When the marriage contract became a reality, they began to look for a customer for the tavern.

A very good customer was soon found. It was the landowner of the shtetl, a Pole named Ignatz Partshevski.

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He bought the tavern with the land, and there was some money. It was then that the date of the wedding was set - the 16th of Tevet. But when it came time to deposit the dowry of 400 rubles, it turned out that this sum was too much for them. They couldn't give more than three hundred rubles, and I still had to dress up for the wedding with that money.

People were a little worried. It was very difficult for them to go back on their word and not give the stated amount. I saw them whispering all the time, walking around as if they were poisoned, as if they couldn't look each other straight in the eye. Finally, I said to the mother of my bride:
"I beg you, have no misgivings and tell me frankly how much you are short of the stated sum."
The mother replied in a tone as if she were telling me a secret: "It's no more than three hundred rubles...no more...I don't have...I don't have any more...that's the plain truth..."

Later I asked my bride:
"Is there really no more, or is it that there is still something you can squeeze out if you push a little?"
My bride replied:
"God forbid, we don't have to push and squeeze anything out. It's really not there anymore. Honestly...there's no money...

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And if there's nothing there, no demands or discussions will help. Either you agree, or..."

The money was deposited in a bank in the name of the bride and groom, but that dashed [the hope of] seventy-five rubles for a coat for me...

Good friends and relatives persuaded us to take over a colonial store in Vilna with the dowry that was in the bank. Such a store was offered in Vilna, and after all, a person had to earn something, especially a person who was about to get married and wanted to lead an independent life. The small colonial store still had a room and a kitchen, so we could immediately set up our own little corner. The store was closed.

I was actually afraid to start as a shopkeeper, to take my first independent step, but we had to do something, we couldn't just sit there with our arms folded and look back on yesterday. Whether we were doing well or badly, whether we were earning our last penny or spending it, we had to take the initiative. That's what I thought at the time, and those thoughts kept me calm.

As I said, the wedding was scheduled for the 16th of Tevet, right at the time of the great frost, when Ahasuerus, the stupid king, married Queen Esther... Nevertheless, it was a happy wedding, celebrated in Vilna, in "Groys-Shnipeshok" [Šnipiškis, a district of Vilna], although it was as cold in the hall as at the North Pole.

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Other guests, however, could not keep their mouths shut: they chattered their teeth...

But the musicians played, a good "badkhen" [wedding jester] rattled out cheerful rhymes at the table, the waiters often walked through the frozen crowd with full tureens and plates, and the cold eased a little...

It will no longer be a shame if I reveal the secret that the top hat and black "surkuk" [cape] in which I posed so brightly at my wedding during the great Tevet frost - loy aleykhem [may you be spared] - were borrowed from a clothing store in Vilna...
However, one must not be discouraged, for even borrowed clothes need not be a sign of a bad future, just as a beautiful, valuable "surkuk" sewn with one's own money need not be a sign of a good future...

At dawn the call went out for the "droshe-geshank" [gift for the groom]. Several dozen rubles, a few silver cups and other small things were dropped, as is customary at a Jewish wedding.

After we had survived the wedding, with all the hustle and bustle, with the blessings and congratulations, with the borrowed top hat and the "surtuk", we, the bride and I, went to the "sheve brokhes" [sheva brachot] to my brother's house in Kene, where we had a really nice time. On Sunday, I remember, we had to go to Vilna to take over the store and start a new, independent life...

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We talked about it all the time, and we always came to the conclusion that our life would not only be new, but also, above all, scarce and poor.

Ignatz Partshevski, the Nementsin landowner who had bought the tavern, after congratulating my young wife on her marriage, drove off with this phrase:
"Yezheli khtsesh bitsh bogaton, to bontsh, pani, pshedtem dvadzyeshtsya pyentsh lyat shvinyon..." [1]
In a more literary language this means - be sparing, save the last morsel from your mouth...

Nevertheless, we were late for the train when we had to go back to Vilna after saying goodbye to my brother...
My sister-in-law immediately began to cry:
"So that's how it is, with such energy you set out to settle down and do business? If you're late for the train now, what will happen later? Energetic people don't talk so much!"

We took the next train to Vilna and immediately took over the store with our small apartment, and the same day I bought some furniture at the bazaar (called "bosyakes" in Vilna) to give the place a homey feel. We earned some money in the store.

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We lived with the hope that the good God, who always helps, would also lead us to a wider path.

I still remember the first Shabbat that [we], the young couple, celebrated in the empty room. It was a poor Shabbat, but a sweet Shabbat. I don't know if anyone, even the man with the greatest wealth in the world, felt as happy as I did when I sat down at the festive table and my wife brought from the kitchen the fine Lithuanian dishes that had been made for a few pennies...

Oh, how good they tasted, what a heavenly aroma they had! And the thought did not leave me for a minute: this is my own house, my own little corner, my own table, my own festive meal...
Yes, only a person who has suffered and struggled and who has always eaten at other people's tables can feel this.

The first beautiful Shabbat was over, and an ordinary, difficult life began for two young people with very little money. We simply didn't have enough money to buy the few things we sold. We couldn't fill the empty spaces in the store with what we earned.

My brother had even referred me to a moneylender who lends money but charges interest. I borrowed a hundred rubles from him, but the interest was really murderous.

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Every week I had to pay the moneylender 50 kopecks in interest and 1 ruble from the loan, i.e. 1.50 a week.
In this case, it's true to say that the interest "ate up" the loan.

After a few weeks, I was again faced with my embarrassing money problem. So I borrowed two hundred rubles from...Eydl! My "Ahavat Zion" sweetheart lived with her husband in Vilna, had a haberdashery store, and also gave out interest-bearing loans from time to time...

Life was very hard and gray.
Our dreams melted away without pity, our ideals vanished like smoke. Who would have thought that "Amnon" of Vilkishok, who wanted to be ordained as a rabbi, would run a colonial store in Vilna and fight for every penny, while the beautiful, dear "Tamar" of Vilkishok would turn into a haberdasher and lend money at interest...

That was the end of the Vilkishok idyll. But my shop was no good at all. The income from the goods sold was not great. Instead, the shop wasted a lot of money. It ate up money and gave us nothing.

After a few months, my wife and I realized that our store was a real disaster for us. We would never be able to do any serious business with it. All our hard work and toil was for nothing. That's when we decided to sell the store and look for something else.

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There was no other way out.

We were looking for a buyer for our store. Understandably, it was not easy. Finally, my wife's brother took over our shop, a young man who had recently married and had a dowry of 1,000 rubles. Since this was a handsome sum in those days, and since the young woman was a very skillful shopkeeper, they fearlessly took over our shop and intended to turn it into a big business in time.

From the whole transaction and all the calculations I made with my brother-in-law, I got barely two hundred rubles, which by now had become the only basis of our life. Every penny we touched of that sum simply took away a piece of our life.

I went around Vilna looking for a "takhles". I would have gone to work even for five rubles a week. But I looked today, I looked tomorrow, but there were no jobs on the streets, and our situation was getting worse every day.

There was even a way out - to become a teacher again, to teach children again. But I resisted with all my strength. I knew that if I started teaching children, I would be a hopeless person forever. It would mean resignation.

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I would have given up and put a tombstone on my skills and young energy.

It's not for nothing that the saying goes: "You can't miss teaching and dying"...
Teaching is compared to death, and I wanted to live first.

I went around unemployed, walked the streets, and during that time we reluctantly took the smallest amounts of money from our poor capital...
The question - what are we going to do? - racked our brains every day.

Once I met a well-known Jew in the street. He wanted to go to America. He had a son, a brother and relatives there, but he didn't have the money to pay for the trip. He said to me:

"Listen to what I want to tell you: You are walking around like idlers looking for work, but you will never be able to do any serious business here. You can see for yourself that everyone here has big problems. I'll give you some advice: lend me fifty rubles for the trip, and we'll go to America together... You're a young person, with the help of my relatives you'll soon get a 'takhles'...
New York is not Vilna, especially when my enterprising American relatives will help you in any possible way. If you travel with me, it will be as if you were travelling with your own brother, and I will, of course, pay you back the fifty rubles as soon as we get there".

This was a thought that interested me very much.

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I thought to myself: in Vilna I have nothing to do, I walk around idly, while in America this can't happen. A young, energetic person must be able to find his way to a "takhles" there. There, a person has wide avenues and great opportunities. No matter what he does, he will be able to make a living.
He cannot get lost there.

"For a healthy person like you, New York is truly a goldmine," he continued, warming me more and more to his words.
"You will earn your money within the first few months... who knows, maybe you are destined to become a rich man in America? You walk around here with your head spinning with worry. And it could be that true happiness awaits you there..."

"But my wife will definitely not approve of my trip," I said. "She won't be able to separate from me. That's a very big obstacle."

The Jew laughed.

"In a matter like this, if you'll excuse me, you don't take a woman's opinion into consideration...if you always listened to women, the world would have a pretty face. But do they know anything about such things? All they know is how to nag their husbands and get money from them for expenses, whether he has them or not. But if a man goes on his way, God will really always help him, and he will end up in a better situation.

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There will be a clamor, a wailing cry from his wife...but no, you can't listen to them, to women..."

That's how he talked, and little by little he convinced me. It was all right for me to get on a train and go wherever my eyes led me, as long as I managed to get something like a serious job.

I came home with my mind made up. But no one was to know about this decision, especially not my young wife, who, as I said, would certainly have disapproved of such a trip.

At that time, America had a bad reputation among our women, many of whom were "agunes" [abandoned wives]. Their husbands had promised them mountains of gold before they left, painted them the most beautiful pictures of fidelity and wealth, but then, when they came to America, they had forgotten their wives and taken another.
And their abandoned wives grew old in great misery in the old country...

It was clear that I was not allowed to talk to my wife about this.

[1] The Slavic words are written in Hebrew letters, and I'm not entirely sure of the translation. It could mean: "If you want to get rich, you must first be a pig for twenty-five year"

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Chapter XVII

I'm going to America. - Our "fundamental" amount. - My imaginary combination. - A "position" in the Kovner gubernye. - My trip with Dovid-Leyb. - Verzhbavolo. - The agent. - The barn. - The emigrants. - The border river. - Eydtkuhnen. - Stalopin. - Königsberg. - Bitter thoughts about my wife. - Dovid-Leyb calms me. - Berlin. - The emigrant building. - What I see through the wagon window. - The emigrant house in Hamburg. - The agents of the shipping companies. - Liverpool. - Twice cheated. - In the steerage. - The journey by sea. - For whose sin? - The African Jew.- "Land! Land!".

The decision was made: I'm going to America. I'll go with the Jew named Dovid-Leyb, and I'll lend him fifty rubles...
Now I had to plunder our so-called "basic" amount. I had to "cut it up, smash it and crush it". The calculation was simple: I had to take one hundred rubles for the trip, I had to lend Dovid-Leyb fifty rubles. And I had to leave fifty rubles for my wife.

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I kept the whole thing a secret from my wife. I had made up a whole "combination" [coherent story]. I told her that I had gotten an excellent job with a reputable forestry company in the Kovno governorate and that, thanks to God, we already were provided with "khayune" [livelihood].

My wife took this at face value and found a new lease on life. A new confidence grew in her. But her joy stabbed me in the heart because I knew it was unfounded.
But I took heart in the hope that America was a realistic match for the dream of "an excellent position in the prestigious forestry company in the Kovno governorate"...

And now the day came when I said goodbye to my wife and went with Dovid-Leyb to the border, that is, as my wife assumed, to the Kovno governorate...
Of course, I was not traveling with a foreign passport, but with an ordinary passport in the name of Meir Shleymovitsh Buris, which, as you know, I had changed because of my enlistment.

And of course, if you traveled abroad with such a passport, you could not be sure of the Russian police and gendarmes, who kept their dog-like eyes on everyone at the train stations near the border, looking for gullible people like me and Dovid Leyb.

Nevertheless, we made it safely to Verzhbalovo, a shtetl on the German border.

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There we inquired about an "agent," a person who helps people cross the border illegally.

Soon we saw a person with quick, mischievous eyes and a quick tongue right in front of us. He said:
"There's nothing to talk about. It's a quick matter. If you give me five rubles a head, I'll take you to the other side..."

"And we'll be safe there?" asked Dovid-Leyb.

"Safe as gold! How lucky I am. One grab, one pull, one pass and - you go straight to the other side!..."

He led us into a large barn where we found a whole camp of men, women and children. They were all emigrants, about eighty people, who had to be smuggled across the border illegally, like me and Dovid-Leyb.

I think that the police and the gendarmes were only looking for emigrants without passports, as long as they had not joined the smugglers. But the moment the smugglers took the emigrants under their wing, the police and gendarmes were already on their side. A company was formed, an organization of police, gendarmes, smugglers and border guards that exploited the poor, frightened emigrants from three sides...

By the way, it was a very small price - five rubles per head. They were still merciful. And we could afford it.

We lay in the barn until four in the morning.

At that hour, the "agent" arrived with five other border smugglers and gave an order:
"Go, don't hesitate, quickly!"
Everyone in the camp stood up. I'm sure everyone's heart was pounding. A natural thought reminded them:
"It's either abroad or prison..."

We poured out of the barn and ran across a field. We went straight to the border.
Soon we saw a small river that had such great power that it divided two kingdoms - Russia and Germany. It was the border river.

A red sun was rising. The short summer night died on the fresh, dewy fields. Our lungs breathed in the glorious air of the dawn, and something like a sudden cheerfulness ran through all our limbs. We believed in the journey and its purpose.

Some of us walked or crawled across the river. The border smugglers carried frightened women and children on their backs. Eighty people, one hundred and sixty feet, crossed this forbidden place, and no one bothered us. Only from a distance did I briefly see a soldier with a rifle, but he kept turning away and then disappeared.

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In this way we crossed the river illegally and began to walk with sure steps on German soil...

We came to Eydtkuhnen [Chernyshevskoye], a fine, clean German town, and stopped at a Jewish inn that had connections with a border smuggler. We spent a whole day there, because even though Germany was a "free country," we didn't dare show ourselves to the Prussian, pot-bellied gendarmes, who recognized an emigrant by his appearance. They would ask him for his passport because Eydtkuhnen was a border town.

In the evening we went in big German carriages to Stalopin [Stallupönen, Ebenrode], which was no longer a border town. They no longer asked for passports. So we quietly boarded a train to Königsberg.

In Königsberg, where we had to wait a few hours for the train to Berlin, I was suddenly overcome by very painful thoughts. I remembered that I had left behind an awkward young woman, pregnant, with little money, in poor conditions. But that was little: I had lied to her. I told her a kind of old wives' tale about a job in a forestry company in Kovno...

And yet I had sneaked away alone to Königsberg in Germany, far from Vilna, far from relatives and friends, on my way to America...

What would happen if my wife found out the whole story? There would be an uproar, a tumult and a noise, and rightly so.

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Who would do such a thing? Who leaves a woman alone in a situation like this? Who would sneak away and take all the money out of the house? And would I really be showered with gold as soon as I set foot on American soil, so that my wife would not have to wait long to get out of her difficult situation?

What had I done? Why had I become the kind of emigrant who ran to America after lying to his wife?

It's a shame to say that I cried bitter, hot tears and wanted to go back. I was going through a severe crisis and all my impetus was gone...

When Dovid-Leyb noticed my tears and dejection, he shouted at me in a somewhat mocking tone:
"Look at the little child, he cried a little!...Why are you crying? You should be ashamed! You're going to America, you want to go to a 'takhles' there! Is that why you have to cry? No problem, your wife will forgive you in peace as soon as you send her the first nice fat American dollars... You know when a woman is in a good mood? When you give her money. That's why she will forgive you everything, especially because you didn't go for yourself, but mainly for her, so that she can have a better, quieter life...
You can't go to America with tears, only with energy, with drive... You won't get anywhere with tears."

I won't say that he reassured me.

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But I wiped my eyes and stopped crying. Anyway, I had started the journey, so I had to finish it. You don't travel to America with tears in your eyes.

We got on the train to Berlin and left Königsberg. The difference between Russia and Germany was striking. Here you see cleanliness, modesty, order. There - dirt, exuberance, chaos. Here everything has its defined time, its hour, its minute. There, everything is indeterminacy, unpunctuality. Here you see wealth, satiation, contentment. There you see only misery, fear, hardship.

The train also flew along with a kind of German certainty. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and small, decorative groves, magnificent villas, smooth highways, as if turned, flew past the clean windows of the carriage, gleaming in the sun...
Everything sparkled in the sun, as if we had traveled to a wonderland...

We arrived in Berlin at two o'clock in the afternoon. We weren't let out of the station, but were taken to a special building for emigrants. There we saw a large crowd of emigrants, an anthill of young and old, men, women and children. Some had settled on the floor with their wives and children, together with the few rags they had brought with them from Russia or Romania or other places where life is not particularly good.

The whole anthill emigrated to America.

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Luckily, we didn't have to wait long. That same day we were all put on a train to Hamburg. We arrived there in the suburbs at twelve o'clock at night. By now we were completely under the control of the shipping companies, who treated us like prisoners.

The agents of the shipping companies led us off the train, and we were not allowed to take a single independent step without their permission.
If any of us wanted to go to a decent hotel, at our own expense of course, we were not allowed to do so.
We were given orders as if we were prisoners, as if we were slaves...

We were taken to a large, dirty emigrant building that was to serve as our home until we boarded the ship. But it was not a free home, we had to pay quite a lot for the night's lodging and stay, like in a hotel. Only it wasn't a hotel, it was more like a prison, an expensive prison...

Sixteen of us were locked up in one room. It was small, dirty, dark, and stuffy. We couldn't breathe. When we went to sleep, we were attacked by horrible armies of bugs that actually ate our bodies. There was absolutely no way to protect ourselves from them. Dead tired, exhausted from the journey, we couldn't sleep a wink. Partly because of the bugs, partly because of the heavy, stuffy air.

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The emigrants groaned, sighed, and cursed their bitter fate...

Oh, how helpless we were! We were treated like prisoners, like animals, like slaves, insulted and abused at every turn, really like slaves. There was no one to talk to, no one to call, no one to ask for help.

The agents of the shipping companies were often swindlers, thieves, tricksters who lived a rich, lavish life at the expense of the misery and hardship of the emigrants...
The agent of the shipping company swindled and cheated me while I was still in Eydtkuhnen. He [officially] sold me a ticket for a ship that would sail directly from Hamburg to New York. That was the deal. And I paid him 98 marks for the ticket. But in fact he gave me a ticket for an English ship that went from Liverpool to New York...

I was desperate. I spent eight days in Hamburg in the dirty emigrant house, full of bugs and lice, and finally they sent me and other emigrants on a ship to Liverpool. It cost a lot of money and time.

In Liverpool I was sent back to an emigrant house and had to suffer and torment myself for another seven days until God helped us and we boarded the ship "Servia" which sailed from Liverpool to New York. May God in heaven protect us from the shipping agents and the emigration houses!

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May no good and well-behaved person ever meet them.
The shipping agent deceived me twice. First, he deceived me with "Liverpool" instead of "Hamburg," and second, with a place in "steerage" instead of "third class".
I bought a third class ticket from him and what I got was a steerage ticket...

I said before that there was no one to talk to or to turn to for help. No one protected us, no one took care of us. We were driven like animals, like dogs, even though we had paid honestly and well for everything, even for every little thing.

I was put in the steerage, that is, thrown into a pile of men, women and children...

Of course, it was "very good" in first class, "good" in second, "bearable" in third, but "unbearable" in steerage!
We couldn't breathe. Stuffy, foul air filled our lungs. We had to sleep on wooden bunks covered with straw, like in prison.

The bunks were arranged in tiers. You could hear heavy breathing high above you and far below you. Sometimes a child would wet himself on the top bunk and it would run down and over your head...

The parasites were unbearable. The children cried, the women screamed, the men were angry and twisted.

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Since it was easy to suffocate in steerage, we spent all day and half the night on the deck of the ship. It was freer and airier there, and our lungs didn't inhale carbon dioxide as they did in steerage. But even there we were not to be envied. The deck of the ship was crowded with weak, poor people who were constantly vomiting, spitting, and throwing up, so it was really no fun to live there.
"For whose sin do we have to suffer like this?"

On the deck of the ship there was constant vomiting, everything around us was filthy, and in the steerage we breathed carbon dioxide and suffered greatly from the cramped conditions and the blood-sucking parasites...

This was not a voyage, but a real inquisition that took our strength and health without mercy. We were depressed, helpless, like seriously ill people.

The ship rocked, swayed, heaved, and struggled with the waves of the great ocean. Sometimes the ship would rise strangely high on a wave, and sometimes it would sink deep into the sea, as if into an area from which it would never emerge.
I don't want to say that we were free from the fear of the sea.

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Though the ship was large, it looked to us like a nutshell on the endless, restless waves...

The ship rocked and swayed, and our aching, frightened hearts rocked and swayed with it...

Heavy days followed heavy nights... It was as if they had merged into a great fog in the steerage and on the ship's deck. And everyone looked yellow-green, emaciated, exhausted.

There was only one person who showed both energy and goodness in that prison camp or prison. It always happens like that in every society, in every community. One person has to stand out with goodness, with heart, with energy. This time it was an African Jew who went to America. I remember him with special gratitude. This man came to the aid of anyone who felt weak, who had difficulty breathing. He would come to the rescue with a little wine, cognac or cologne, and if that didn't help, he would have a good, warm word on his lips...

With people like that, even the worst suffering was forgotten...

The ship was fighting for its life and our lives. Day after day, honestly and diligently, it sliced through the mighty waters of the ocean. And on the ninth day, slowly and darkly, a strip of land appeared on the horizon.

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It's really hard for me to describe the joy, the excitement, the confusion, the happy, nervous cries in different languages:
"Land! Land! Land!"

Not only the joy and happiness that we were now moving from shaky, unstable ground to solid ground, but also the only and last hope for our future shouted from us. For all of us, the whole tween deck, this unusual, strange, stumbling tangle of people, had torn itself away from its home, its nest, and set out in search of its future in America.

"Land! Land! Land!" cried the men, women, and children. "Land!" cried the air, the ship, the steerage, and the voices merrily mingled with the sound of the broad, mighty waves...

An agonizing thought suddenly pierced my heart like a thin needle:
"There before my eyes is the coast of America. But my wife is in Vilna, and she still thinks that I'm in a good position in the Kovner governorate... what will happen when she learns the truth?"

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Chapter XVIII

The first impression of New York. - The first worries. - A conversation with Dovid-Leyb's brother - Drudgery Number 1: In the factory at the sewing machine - Despair. - Drudgery Number 2: A mattress factory going to hell. - Drudgery Number 3: At a fruit cart. - In a New York prison. - The judge and his sentence. - Drudgery Number 4: A business with remnants. - My earnings. - The partner is a swindler. - The Galician Jew. - The book as a rabbi and life as a rabbi. - The difference between me and the Galician Jew. - My new partner and his philosophy.

I'll leave out Castle Garden, the famous Island of Tears, with the whole inquisition procedure upon entering American soil, especially toward us, the "steerage" people. So much has been written about all this that I would only be repeating what has already been said.
I'd rather start with New York.

New York made an enormous impression on me. As a young man, for whom Vilna was the biggest city in the world, I looked at New York enchanted and couldn't believe my eyes.

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The "subway", the underground railway, and the "elevator", the overhead railway, the exaggerated, gigantic buildings, the so-called "skyscrapers", the endless streets that somehow had no beginning and no end, and the enormous bridges that connected Brooklyn with New York, all looked to me like a work made not by human but by truly divine powers.

My eyes flew in all directions, and the bigger and more colossal the "New York work" seemed to me, the smaller and more helpless I felt.

What are people doing here, why are they adapting, why are they joining this terrible, cold, stony giant? By the way, my pockets were empty, there was nothing left. My ears picked up an unknown, foreign language. I didn't see a single friendly look in the thousands of eyes I met on the street...

First of all, Dovid-Leyb had to pay me back the fifty rubles I had lent him in Vilna. And his relatives also had to put me up in New York...

I went with Dovid-Leyb to his brother to get at least the fifty rubles from him in the meantime.
But his brother said:
"I don't have any money lying around... who gives money here? You're a greenhorn...when Dovid-Leyb starts working, he'll give you the money back...I've got nothing".
I hung my head and asked:
"Maybe you can at least help me with a job?

I must at least earn something..."
He replied:
"You are a greenhorn. You have to look for a job, and I don't have time to look for you, my time is expensive. You must do it yourself. Work hard, don't be lazy, and you will find a job.

From that day on, my running, my searching, and my toil in New York began. My work in New York also began quickly. For the sake of clarity, I will number them.

Drudgery Number 1

I found a large advertisement in a newspaper that they were looking for workers for a bag factory.
So I went to that factory. I was accepted. With God's help I entered the factory. There were hundreds of workers. They were sitting in front of sewing machines, sewing bags.

I was also put in front of a sewing machine. My fingers were not used to that kind of work. It never occurred to me that I would have to get used to a sewing machine after I was married.

Understandably, I did a bad job. The work didn't go well for me. My mood was very low. I was desperate.
I quit my job and left. Let what God gives happen.

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Drudgery Number 2

I quickly started making mattresses with a partner who was supposed to be an expert. We bought materials and threw ourselves into the work like wolves.
We worked very hard and bitterly, but we ended up paying extra for the business. The reason: we didn't know the sources where we could buy the materials cheaper. We paid dearly for everything and couldn't compete with other mattress manufacturers.
So the business collapsed. The mattress manufacturer was finished.

Drudgery Number 3

It was a fruit business. I was selling fruit on the street. My partner was actually Dovid-Leyb's son, who had been in America for several years. I stood there with a small cart full of bananas, grapes, oranges and other good fruit. It was a business of shouting: you had to shout often and energetically:
"Buy, buy, customers, good bananas, oranges, pineapples, worth gold!"

You have to work very hard. You have to get up at the crack of dawn and buy the fruit. First the work of buying, then the drudgery of selling. But you earn some money. And that alone gives you courage. You see yourself with the freshly earned penny.

But something happens.

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I don't know that you can't stand on a street corner with a cart. That is forbidden. Anyway, I am standing on a corner with my fruit cart. Immediately, as if from hell, a tall, huge American policeman appears and arrests me with my little cart.

I am taken to a small room and locked in. I sit there, my head buzzing with thoughts. An hour passes, then two. My thoughts are already jumping around like crazy, one on top of the other. Who knows how long I'll be here? Maybe I'll have to sit here for a few months until the court hearing? Maybe they'll even add slander to my fruit cart and I'll die in prison for sure?

Suddenly, the door is unlocked and I am led into a government office. Sitting in front of a large table is a respected man, a judge, as it turns out. He doesn't ask me if I'm guilty or not, but informs me in a cold, indifferent tone that I will be fined three dollars. If I pay the money, my cart will be returned to me (the fruit was not taken) and I will be released from jail.

But I think with a bitter heart:
"To hell with such a way of making a living that involves so much fear!"

So the fruit cart business was dissolved.

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Drudgery number 4

Then I start a brand new, unusual business. It's a mixture of remnants from the tailoring factories and workshops, such as wool, fabric, cloth, corduroy, satin, silk and the like. This mixture is sorted, each piece according to its type, and sent back to the textile factory where it is made into new goods.

At first glance, it wasn't a bad business, although it required a lot of hard work.
I formed a partnership with a young man who was particularly skilled in this area, and so we began, as they say, to set the wheel in motion.

We rented a cellar, bought barrels to put the sorted remnants in, acquired some "mixed goods" from the tailoring factories, and set to work. When we had finished processing the few goods and packed them as we should have, a merchant came down and bought them for us at a profit. That cheered us up a bit. We then acquired a larger quantity of remnants and even found a merchant's office that offered us fifty dollars for the sorted goods.

After working for four weeks, we did an accounting and found that we had earned ten dollars a week.
At that time, food in America cost very little. A poor person could actually get by on three dollars a week.

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For example, a pound of fish cost two cents, a pound of meat six cents, a kilo of white bread two cents. Such a period of low prices is unimaginable today. It sounds like a legend.

Since I cooked everything myself on a stove and slept in our working cellar, I lived quite well on three dollars a week and saved seven dollars every week. That was called "making a living" in America.

But my partner was a young man and a swindler. Once, when we had prepared a lot of goods, my partner went away and sold them without my knowledge. He took a large amount of money as a down payment. I was on the street. I returned to our cellar just as the goods were being loaded onto a cart.

Of course, I immediately realized it was a scam. My partner was obviously trying to rip me off, and a huge scandal broke out. I had to call the police, who actually realized that I was right, and the goods were taken off the cart to be taken back to the cellar.

My partner had disappeared with the money, but the goods stayed with me. I was left alone in the cellar. I felt a little sick at heart. Our business was set up so that two people had to work together. But where could I find a suitable and honest partner?

One day, the door opened and a shaven young man came in, a door-to-door peddler of religious items such as ritual fringes, mezuzot, tefillin and the like.

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He gently and skillfully suggests that I buy something from him. Suddenly he looks at me sharply and even throws his arms around my neck...

I recognized the young man as a Galician Jew who had traveled with me to America in steerage. He was very poor and had served me for a small coin during the difficult minutes of seasickness. He had a goatee then and looked completely different.

We talked. During the conversation it turned out that - apart from the fact that we had both set foot on American soil and that I was the man of ability and knowledge (while he was a Galician, simple young man with little ability and knowledge) - he had managed to save several hundred dollars before the time we now met in New York. I, on the other hand, had saved only a paltry thirty dollars...

The difference between us was really this: I had come to America almost directly "from the religious book", from learning-if not for myself, then with children-and he had come to the land of Columbus directly from lived life. His rabbi was life - my rabbi was the religious book. And the result of these different stories had really shown itself in New York.

The young man from Galicia was alive and happy. He already felt the breath and the rhythm of the huge city. He had adapted quickly, earned money and could already boast a certain amount of savings.

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And I was a complete greenhorn, the dust of Vilna was still on me, which I couldn't shake off, and I had worked very, very hard for a penny, simply without eating or sleeping...

Don't forget that the Galician had left a wife and three small children in his homeland without any means of support.
I suggested to this cheerful Jew that he enter into a partnership with me.

"That is enough peddling for you," I said to him, "you are a capable man. Invest your three hundred dollars in my business and we will work together. I mean, you'll get more out of it than peddling. It's a good business here, it just needs to be expanded.
The Galician Jew agreed. So I found a capable partner. We expanded our business, bought larger quantities of goods, and made a good profit.

The Galician Jew used to say:
"If you're not lazy, you can make money anywhere. But in a dead country like Galicia, you'll be ruined baking bagels... No matter how hard you work... it's just dead. There is no livelihood there..."

And he worked really hard.

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Chapter XIX

The secret is out. - My wife and relatives panic. - I'm bombarded with letters. - Between two flames. - The Galician Jew. - Our business. - Days of Awe in New York. - The Jewish street in New York. - The Days of Awe Fair. - After Sukkot. - An unexpected talk with the Galician Jew. - His plans. - He goes to Saint Louis. - His letter. - The new letter from Vilna. - What should I do? - My worries and my heartache. - I don't want to go to Vilna. - American freedom. - The American and his character. - A little philosophy. - Getting things off my chest. - The end. - Goodbye, Ameritshka!

Eventually the secret had to be revealed: My wife found out that I was in America. .. And while I was working hard with the remnants in the basement workshop, eating poorly and scrimping on everything to earn a few pennies, my wife moved heaven and earth in Vilna.

There was a veritable earthquake of screams, cries for help, and complaints. And, as always happens in such cases, people wrote and whispered fanciful things about my departure:

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It was said that I had escaped to America with a blonde girl. A relative was found who had seen me leave Vilna with the girl...

I was bombarded with letters. They didn't want me to live until I came home. I was between two flames. They blocked my energy.

My letters, which I kept writing from New York, didn't have the slightest effect on Vilna. My idea of going to America was simple and logical. I was walking around Vilna without a job, our situation was getting worse from day to day, so I went to America. Because there you can achieve something.

It was understandable that I kept my trip a secret. If I had told my wife, she would never have let me go. The secret was essential.

But people in Vilna saw it differently. My wife saw herself almost as an abandoned woman, and her relatives and loved ones agreed with her...

When my wife gave birth to our child, a boy, the circumcision was done quietly, almost in secret. People were ashamed of themselves and of others: Such impertinence, the man had left his wife...

That's how they interpreted it in Vilna, and I tortured myself in New York. Admittedly, my income in New York wasn't great, but every day I put down deeper roots in American life.

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And that was worth a lot. It showed and testified that I would have the strength to work my way up in America and make a respectable business there.
I lived very well with the Galician Jew. We worked and ate together. Our expenses were low and our business grew a little.

However, the cheerful, hard-working Galician Jew was not very happy with our business. He thought we were making too little money and that we should look for something else. His great impulse could not be calmed by our business in the cellar with the remnants...

Meanwhile, the Days of Awe were approaching. There was great unrest in the Jewish world, as well as in Lithuania. Minyonim [prayer quorums] were formed at workplaces, and people ran around to buy tickets for reserved seats in the minyonim and shuln.

The Vilna cantor Kuper [Cooper], who had set foot on American soil at the same time I had, davened for the Days of Awe at the Bes-Hamedresh Hagodel [great house of study]. In another shul, the "city" maggid of Vilna, R' Yenkele Kharif, davened.

A mishpat had even happened to him in Vilna. He had squandered - may this never happen to a Jew - ten thousand rubles of the money that had been deposited with him, such as dowries, guarantees and the like...

He had to leave Vilna.

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However, the Jewish people in New York took great pity on him. They paid his debts in Vilna and he became the Chief Rabbi of New York.

I remember the first sermon that R' Yenkele Kharif gave in the Bes-Hamedresh Hagodel. Things were boiling in the Jewish part of the city. The fiery Litvaks [Jewish Lithuanians] came running in their thousands, and there was so much pushing and shoving that the police had to use rifle butts to keep order. There were many wounded and injured.

In general, the Jewish part of New York was a copy of Lithuania or Poland. However, some lines in the copy had been changed: The small, narrow streets had become wide and long, and the small houses had become huge buildings. The Jews were dressed in their familiar way and spoke our dear mother tongue, Yiddish, on which our world is based.

I heard very little English around me. Our Jews - may all of them, young and old, be in good health - had even brought with them their native bugs and dirt, along with their rags from their former nests in Lithuania and Poland.

On the eve of the Days of Awe, the Jewish streets boiled like a cauldron. Everywhere ritual fringes, mezuzot, makhzoyrim [prayer books for the holidays], shofars, tefillin and the like were being sold, and the profits were burning in hands like at a fair.

My Galician Jew, who couldn't stand still, had left the basement workshop and thrown himself into the Days of Awe fair with all his energy.

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He made up to fifteen dollars a day, and being an honest man, he shared his earnings with me. I would sit in the cellar and work while he traded at the "fair."
For Rosh Hashanah he traded in makhzoyrim, for Yom Kippur in candles, for Sukkot in etrog, for Hoshana Rabbah in "Hoshanot" [Sukkot prayers recited while circling the bimah]...

He was not ashamed. That feeling was completely foreign to him. The energy inside him was boiling and bubbling, and he was happy when he could release even a little of it.

After Sukkot, we sold our sorted goods, took stock, shared the profits, and planned to buy new, finished off-cuts from the tailoring factories. Suddenly the Galician Jew said:

"I'm leaving this business..."
"What do you mean, you're leaving?"
"Very simple: it's no business for me."
"Why?"
"Bah!" he waved his hand and pointed contemptuously at the sorting barrels.
"What good is it to me, and what do I get out of it?"
"Do you have a better business?"
"I have..."
"Like what? Let's hear it.
"I'm leaving here."
"What does that mean?"

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The Galician Jew explained with a sly, good-natured smile:
"Understand, R' Meir, it's tight in New York..."
"What do you mean, tight?"
He went on to explain:

"I've already inquired about everything, R' Meir... the way you're looking at me, I've already poked my nose into everything and found out that fifty thousand emigrants arrive here on the ships every day, and they all stay in New York... Do you understand, R' Meir, that life is getting tight here, the competition is great, the emigrant is even willing to work for half a dollar a day in order not to starve... ....
If that's the case, how can you work your way up, I ask you?"

He looked at me with sharp, troubled eyes.
"Why did I go to America?" he asked, immediately answering the question himself.
"I went to America to make money, to get out of trouble, to stand on my own two feet. But in New York it is too narrow for emigrants, and I don't want to earn money in confinement and competition... I can do it much easier and better..."
"How, in what way?"

"How, you ask? Well, you'll hear. I'll go away somewhere, to a smaller town, say Saint Louis, and I'll go to work there... There are few emigrants there.

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The competition is weak and you can really make money there..."

I tried to dissuade him.
"You're being a bit hasty," I said, "you're not looking at things properly. No matter how you look at our business, you have to admit that it is improving and getting bigger... Let's be a little more patient, and our business will give us the opportunity to work our way up socially at the same time..."

But he wouldn't hear of it. He said:
"It's a pity for every day, even every hour."
"Have you finally decided the matter?"
"Yes, it's decided! I'm going to Saint Louis, and you're going to work here! But I give you my word of honor that, with God's help, I'll call you from New York for another job in a few weeks at the latest... You can count on me. I don't want to stay here in New York, I have to earn money. And you need to do the same!

That was the end of our conversation.

He soon left for Saint Louis and I was left alone in the cellar with the leftovers. But the Galician Jew kept his promise. Ten days later, at the latest, I received a letter from him advising me to leave everything and go straight to Saint Louis, where the conditions were so good that I could even stay in the same business as in New York.

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But it would be much easier and better to make money here.

I believed the Galician Jew and would have done as he advised.
But as fate would have it, I soon received four letters from Vilna. When I read them, my eyes really darkened. I had been targeted, told to go home as soon as possible, and threatened...

The letters had a strong effect on me, and I became completely despondent. What did they want from me? They wanted me to do something crooked, something wild. They wanted me to leave America, where a person actually gets down to serious business. But they wanted me to go back to dead Vilna, where there are so few opportunities for anyone who wants to work. And I wanted to work, so I wasn't lazy. I led a frugal, dry life, like an ascetic...

I was extremely stingy. I respected every cent. If I bought some leftovers and they had to be transported to my cellar, I saved the money for the cart and carried the material on my own shoulders without any shame...

I carried sacks and bags just to save money, as long as I had an extra dollar to put aside. So the letters from home upset and annoyed me to the utmost. I saw the stupidity in them.

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I had wasted so much money on the trip, then suffered in New York until I finally turned the corner, and now I was supposed to take it all and wipe it out in one fell swoop!

But I had to go to Vilna. The letters wouldn't let me live my life. To lighten my mood, I told myself that when I got to Vilna, I would get advice about travel expenses and go back to America with my wife and child - not to New York, but to Saint Louis, to the Galician Jew. And we could easily work our way up there.

I had no desire to leave America. Anyone who has ever tasted American freedom will understand me. It's a wide world without the Russian police boot on your neck, so to speak, and all paths are open to you. This freedom, this breadth, impressed a person, illuminated his soul, changed his whole psyche.
It gave you a broader view of life.

But on the other hand, man became very materialistic. He lost the sociable softness and warmth of home. The American is a hard and calculating person. He does things with his head rather than with his heart. He will help you, but if his help does not produce results, he will turn away from you. He does not like to help a second time.

This is because it proves that the person who has already asked for his help once is a good-for-nothing.

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He is an annoying person, a dolt, and in his opinion you should get rid of him as soon as possible.

If you're under pressure and have a relative in America, he'll be happy to send you a boat ticket (they didn't know about visas or quotas then), and when you get to America, he'll give you a few kisses and tell you:
"America is a country of labor. Go work and make a living.

He won't talk to you about anything because he's a busy man and "time is money."
But when some time has passed and you don't fit in at all, and you keep coming to him with a dejected face, he will either not want to talk to you at all, or he will buy you a boat ticket to go back home and get rid of you, the good-for-nothing. ....

The American is by nature hard, cold, matter-of-fact, and soberly logical. He dares not be sentimental. His heart knows no softness.

One can talk much and interestingly about America and the Americans who appeared before my eyes after I set foot on the land of Columbus.
But I am afraid that I would say absolutely nothing new, because much, very much, has already been written on the subject.

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Artists, poets, publicists, tourists, world travelers, manufacturers, politicians, and diplomats have all spoken at length and in various ways about America and Americans.
If I touch on the subject here, it is only in passing and with the most innocent of intentions: I just wanted to get some grief off my chest....

In the end, it was with a heavy heart that I had to say goodbye to my friends and acquaintances, to my cellar with its barrels and remnants, to New York with the fever and noise of American life, with its subways and elevated trains.
I had to get on the ship that was going to "Europe"...

Farewell to America, the land of the dollar, where people like my Galician Jew, people with drive and the desire to work, climb higher and higher up the dizzying ladder of life...

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Chapter XX

Back to Vilna. - On the ship "Germania". - Night storm on the sea. - A flour that walks, a foot that lies. - A dance of wind and waves. - The charm of home. - From Hamburg to Eydtkuhnen. - Smuggling across the border. - Fear and terror. - "Stoi!" and a shot. - In Vilna. - Worries about "a takhles". - R' Mordekhay Epshteyn [Mordechai Epstein]. - My beer store in Binyakoni. - The result of my venture. - A "Sholem Aleykhem" of a wealthy person with counted fingers. - R' Aharon-Dovid. - A watchman's hut where prayers are said and the shofar is blown. - The German with the stallion. - R' Aharon-Dovid's idea. -

I experienced my journey home from America as an accomplished man. I was just as poor now as I was when I left for America, but I said to myself, come what may, I would never travel in steerage again, because that was simply risking my life.

I traveled second class. The beautiful, big ship "Germania" glided easily over the ocean waters.

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If it hadn't been for the worries, you would have thought it was a nice pleasure trip for a tourist...
The weather was also kind to us. A sky with sun, a sea with silence and calm. It was particularly pleasant to sit on the deck of the ship and look out over the endless water, which moved so calmly and rhythmically, as if the sea had forever banished all evil storms and tempests...

After several days, however, the ocean suddenly regretted its silence. Suddenly it fell into a deep rage, even though no one had insulted it and no one had bumped into it. Certainly not us on the ship. But he took out its big, bad oceanic heart on our ship. He grabbed it with his big, watery hands and threw it into the sky, and soon after, he threw it back into the deepest depths. The ship groaned and struggled with the last strength of a doomed man...

All this happened at night when everyone was asleep. I don't know what happened to my brothers and sisters on the "Germania" that night, but I - and it's a shame to say it - fell out of bed and hurt myself quite badly...
As the floor of the ship kept rising, first on one side, then on the other, I threw myself lengthwise and rolled like a ball until I could stand on my feet again.

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I wanted to walk, but I couldn't because the floor was walking instead of me. As you know, only one person can walk - either the person or the floor.

In the end, I clenched my teeth, strained my strength and muscles to the limit, and pulled myself up onto the deck of the ship, holding on to the railings and walls.

On the deck of the ship, I was suddenly surrounded by a roar of water so furious it almost deafened me. In the gray light of the night I saw a terrible dance of waves crashing against each other, battering our poor "Germania".

A wild wind whistled into the waves and danced with them.
During this dance, our innocent ship's deck filled with water, which the silent, balancing sailors energetically pumped out with their engines and poured back into the sea.

By dawn, however, the storm had subsided. A bright sun broke through the clouds. It poured its rays over the restless waves, and the ocean calmed.
The waves no longer danced their storm dance. And the ship glided again easily and safely over the calm ocean, as if over a mirror.

There were many Germans on the ship, and now, as we approached the port of Hamburg, the healthy and cheerful Germans lined up in rows.

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They raised their heads manfully and began to sing their national songs enthusiastically, such as "Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles," "Die Wacht am Rhein," and others.
I stood there and listened to their powerful, virile and lively voices. Meanwhile, I envied them very much.
Oh, it's good to have a home, a homeland, a fatherland. You feel the power of a piece of earth that can connect and unite the people of a nation.

Only in one case, when it is particularly agonizing, does exile hit your nerves and senses: you see the Germans getting off the ship like brothers, like relatives on earth, and you take a step like a Jew: "Not safe, foreign...".

I got off the train in Hamburg and went straight to Eydtkuhnen. Here the worries about the border began. You had to cross it illegally. But now it was much more difficult and dangerous than before. Now you had to go from Germany to Russia, and in this case it wasn't just the border that was dangerous, but the whole area near the border.

It's no exaggeration to say that every piece of land on the Russian side was a special border for those who wanted to smuggle themselves from Germany into Russia.

I was stuck in Eydtkuhnen for several days. Finally, in the evening, together with other border crossers, I was taken to a farmer who lived not far from the border.

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There we were packed into a barn and told to wait.
In fact, our teeth were chattering with fear, cold and excitement.
At two o'clock that night, we were led out of the barn and sneaked across the border. It seemed as if my heart was beating harder and louder than my footsteps, as if it was sitting inside me, firing shots all the time...

Near the border, dogs suddenly barked, we heard a rifle shot and a soldier shouting from a distance: "Stoi!" [Stop!] My heart froze in horror, big drops of sweat ran down my forehead...

Our people smugglers went over to the soldier and whispered something to him, while we slowly moved away, our hearts pounding with fear. We crept along like shadows and were lucky to reach Verzhbalovo. Here we hid in a small house and waited for a while.

The next day I sent a telegram to Vilna and took the train home...
That was the end of my journey to America.

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After the first meeting with my wife, my brother and my relatives - and the reproaches - came the joy: because everything passed like in a dream.

Normal everyday life with its worries began. I drew up a balance sheet, and the end of it was very sad: of all the American "epopeia", I had no more than two hundred German marks in my pocket...

Again I had to think about a "takhles" (how many times?). Now I not only had a wife, but was also the father of a child. And so the worries doubled.

Since my brother-in-law, R' Shmuel Natanzon, was an employee of the then well-known brewery "Epshteyn un Zun" [Epstein and Son], and my brother bought beer from this brewery for his tavern in Kene, we came up with the idea that my brother should ask R' Mordekhay

Epshteyn [Mordechai Epstein or Mordechaj Owsiej Epstein], the main owner of the brewery, for a position for me.

At that time the breweries in Vilna had their own wagons for transporting beer to the stations. Understandably, each beer wagon had several employees: they delivered the beer, collected the money for it, kept the accounts, and so on.

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My brother asked R' Mordechai Epstein to give me a job in such a beer wagon.
"He is a capable young man," my brother praised me, "and he will work for you faithfully and honestly."
But R' Mordechai Epstein replied:
"It is too easy a job for your brother. What use is it to him? I have a better plan for him. Let him open a beer store somewhere in a good location, and he will make a good living."

"But where will you find a good location?" asked my brother.
"It is not as difficult as you think," replied R' Mordechai. "There, for example, at the Binyakoni station, he can set up a warehouse for my beer... It's a very good place. The surrounding towns will give a lot to make money with beer. There is a big clientele there. It's definitely a good business for your brother."

I thought it would be a good business for me, so I started working.

Since I didn't have enough money for the business, my brother and brother-in-law gave me a bill of exchange for over a hundred rubles. I went to Binyakoni and stayed with the innkeeper. I set up a store with Epshteyn's beer, and with my brother-in-law I went around the surrounding towns. It was a kind of propaganda tour.

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People should buy their beer only in Binyakoni, in a new store that would treat customers well and honestly.

I still remember a number of small towns where I stopped with my brother-in-law, all ending in "shok", namely Vasilishok, Kaleleshok, Eyshishok, Lipnishok, Devinishok, and so on.

The business was established and didn't go badly. I sat alone in Binyakoni, ordered the beer alone, did the bookkeeping alone, sometimes washed the bottles alone and rolled the barrels alone. The work was "up to my neck".

My wife was in Vilna, in a small room with a kitchen. She worked very hard and struggled, but she endured everything quietly and calmly. She lived with great confidence in the future, without complaints or demands.

And I "lay" with the beer in Binyakoni. But after three months I realized that I would be buried with my business. I made a balance sheet, and it turned out that not only had I not earned anything, but I had lost half of my capital, although I had worked beyond my strength.

The cause of this crash was very simple: the brewery charged me for the beer I ordered at the same price at which I sold the beer to my customers... It was an outrageous injustice, but all my complaints did not help.

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I screamed at a wall. Not even R' Mordechai Epstein himself would listen to my complaints.

R' Mordechai Epstein was one of the great wealthy, privileged people of Vilna. He was a Jew with a beautiful beard and good business dealings, and he often looked into a page of Gemara. However, he boasted of his position and made himself very important. He was one of those hard, cold, wealthy men who shook hands by calculation:
He would give two fingers to one person, three fingers to another person of higher rank, four fingers to a person of even higher rank. And if a person was lucky enough to get all five fingers, he had to be very rich...

He was very proud and tense towards people who were lower than him, and he had only a certain respect for rich people...
The people who worked in his brewery earned very little. His relative, one of his most honest employees, received only five "karbovantses" [Ukrainian currency unit] a week from him...

In the [watchman's] hut by the brewery gate sat R' Aharon-Dovid, the blower of the "teki'ah" [long blast on the shofar], an old-fashioned, honest, somewhat strange Jew of a type that no longer exists today. He was tall and long. Especially his hands, feet, beard and forelocks were long.

Every morning, even before the carts left the brewery, R' Aharon-Dovid would sit in his hut, wrapped in his tallit and tefillin, and pray at the top of his lungs.
And when it came to the "Shirat Hayam" [Song of the Sea, part of the morning prayer], he would fall into a terrifying ecstasy.

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He used to jump out of his hut, roll up the skirts of his caftan and walk on the ground with his long legs, as if he were crossing the sea on dry land...

Since he was a shofar blower, he would practice blowing the shofar every month of Elul. He would do so with great fanfare. Immediately after praying in his hut, in front of the gate of the brewery, he would solemnly blow the "30 tones" with his shofar [according to the "order of shofar blowing"], giving the impression of a person who was whistling to the whole world.

Because of this shofar-blowing, a great disaster almost occurred. The brewmaster of the beer factory, a tall blond German, had a young stallion. Early one morning, he harnessed the stallion and rode out to the gate at the very moment when R' Aharon-Dovid, with great triumph, blew a solemn "teki'ah" [long, continuous blast], a shevarim [three short notes], and a teru'ah [rapid succession of short notes].

The stallion was frightened to death. Frightened, he jumped as if he had been attacked by a wolf, broke through the gate, and dragged the cart with the brewmaster inside. It was a miracle that the brewer was saved. It could have been a very sad end.

The German even wanted to take revenge on R' Aharon-Dovid. But there was no harsh revenge: he was merely forbidden to blow the shofar in his hut...

He was very burdened with children, but received only four rubles a week.

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Understandably, he was a poor Jew. In order to bring about a small increase in his salary, he came up with the following idea. He took a package of religious books and went to R' Mordechai Epstein's office on the eve of Passover.
"R' Mordechai," he said, "I want to ask you a question about the purity laws: Is it permissible to drink your beer on Passover?"

R' Mordechai looked at him with great astonishment and replied:
" Don't you know the blessing of the elimination of leaven - where it says that any kind of beer is 'khomets' [with leavened flour and therefore forbidden on Passover]? How did you suddenly come up with such a question?"

"Understand me, R' Mordechai," said R' Aharon-Dovid with a smile, "your beer is very light, it is watery, please forgive me...but in sixty buckets of water you will hardly find a grain of barley...well, what does that grain of barley matter? There will only be 'bitul beshishim' [1] in that amount of water...no more. Unless, if you are suspicious, your worker walking around the beer might accidentally drop a piece of bread in it... But back to the law: If your worker doesn't have any bread at all, wouldn't your beer be kosher according to the laws of Passover?"

R' Mordechai Epstein shrugged.
"I don't know," he said, "what your point is?"

"My point is this," took over R' Aharon-Dovid. "Your beer must have a good reputation, that is, the reputation of a *true beer with 'khomets'* ...

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But then you'll have to give me a raise for a piece of bread, for 'khomets', for a beer with 'khomets'...you know what I mean, R' Mordechai?"

The cold, tense, rich man laughed a lot this time and increased his income by one ruble a week.

By the way, the good, kind-hearted, tall Aharon-Dovid was not happy about his raise for long. He was dismissed, and his job in the hut outside the brewery gate was taken over by a young man.

The hut was deserted. No one prayed in it anymore, no one blew the shofar, and no one crossed the ground with long strides - like a man crossing the sea...

You don't see people like Aharon-Dovid anymore. They have been lying in the cemetery for a long time, and their graves are overgrown with tall grass...

[1] bitul-beshishim= If a forbidden food is mixed with a permitted food in such a way that the forbidden food is completely absorbed into the permitted food and together they form a single dish, in many cases the halachic 60% rule (Bitul Beshishim) applies. If the forbidden substance or food does not constitute more than one-sixtieth of the total food, the entire food is permitted according to this rule.

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Chapter XXI

The second beer store. - Novoyelne. - The big worry. - My complaints to Mordechai Epstein. - The Polyeser region - good business. - Where to get two hundred rubles. - Interest and men. - My brother's help. - It's going well. - The beer company "Shopen". - The big competition. - Vilkovishki. - Norman and Levental. - A carefree life. - A clerk in a beer store becomes a rabbi. - The beer merger. - R' Mordechai's plan against the merger. - A story and a Shabbat dinner. - R' Mordechai wonders.

Despite the fact that I failed with my beer shop at the Binyakoni station, I didn't lose heart. I started looking for a larger area where I could establish a beer store with a larger turnover.
I hoped to make up for the loss I had made in Binyakoni with a bigger turnover.
I finally stopped in the Novogrod region. It was a good place with many small towns. I started working again.

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I set up my beer store in a Jewish tavern at the Novoyelne station.

My profit from sales soon became very large, and it would have been quite a good business. But as all the businesses I started in those days had some kind of flaw or problem, the Novoyelne beer store was also "limping on one leg":
The problem was that Epstein's beer was very light (Aharon-Dovid was really right: it contained a lot of water!), and when the warm summer days began, the beer spoiled.
It turned into a kind of yellow, cloudy barley soup...

I saw that things were going badly and that I would receive the same punishment as in Binyakoni, so I handed over the beer store to my relative, a young man who had just married and who was also beginning to walk my difficult paths. I myself went to Vilna.

Once again I came to R' Mordechai Epstein with a bitter heart. But as was his custom, he greeted me with a cold "Sholem Aleykhem" with two fingers and barely listened to my words.

This time, however, my tone was sharper. There was already a bitterness in my complaints that would not soon subside.
He softened a bit and said:
"Shut up, what's there to talk and complain about? I'm giving you the Polyeser region! Go and get your customers in Baranovitsh, in Slonim, in Volkovysk, and in other towns and villages.

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And earn as much as you can! Drive the wagons yourself, take care of the beer, take care of the customers, run the business, work and earn!"

This was serious business, not Binyakoni and not Novoyelne. I immediately got my act together. But he said to me in his dominating tone:
"But you must give me a deposit. I can't do it without it."
"But that's difficult for me..." I said, hanging my head.
"I paid what I had for your business. I've been ruined by it!"

"But it doesn't help," he continued in that domineering tone, "two hundred rubles security. That's the way it is with us."

I ran furiously out of Epstein's office. The floor shook under my feet. I had to keep the two hundred rubles. There was no way I was going to lose such a good deal for that amount.

As I always did when I was in trouble, I went straight to my brother in Kene. When I told him that I could recover in business, but that I needed 200 rubles for a cautery, he looked at me in astonishment.
"I've already endorsed enough bills for you," he said, "and the bills aren't even paid yet. You know I'm under pressure myself now and have to take out interest-bearing loans..."
My brother was telling the truth.

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He had recently built his own tavern and was in debt. He had enough to worry about. But the rule is that the one who pays interest is always a better person than the one who takes interest. My brother didn't hesitate for long.
He went with me to Vilna and borrowed two hundred rubles for me, which we deposited with R' Mordechai Epstein as security.

That same day, my sister-in-law also went to Vilna. She certainly had a plan to influence her brother so that he wouldn't lend money to me. Unfortunately, she arrived too late. Everything was already over. I don't blame myself, God forbid. A woman is like that, she is usually more frugal, fearful and limited than a man...

R' Mordekhai Epstein gave me a beer wagon and I took a trip on the "Polyeser" railroad. I stopped in all the surrounding towns and negotiated with the local beer buyers that they would only buy beer from my wagon.

After that, I put all beer sales on the Polyeser railroad on a solid footing. I set up a beer warehouse in Baranovitsh [Baranavichy] and hired energetic people for this work. In one month I bought up to five beer wagons, and my material situation improved to such an extent that I was able to save rubles.

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Understandably, I was completely absorbed in the drudgery around the beer and the calculations for it, and had already forgotten how to live among respectable people...

Later, however, I cleaned up and tried to catch my breath. But you weren't allowed to come to Epstein's beer factory all dressed up. He would immediately examine you, feel your coat and suit, and in the end raise the price of his beer...

At that time two merchants from Kovno, Volf and Soloveytshik, bought the famous Vilnius brewery with the brand name "Shopen" [Szopen or Chopin]. Immediately a terrible competition began among the breweries in Vilna. The price of beer plummeted.

The competition was a matter of life and death. The old Vilna brewers wanted to drive out the Kovno merchants who had taken over the Shopen brewery, and the Kovno merchants wanted to bring the Vilna brewers to their knees - as it always happens in life.

As a result of this competition, my business suffered greatly. My profits became smaller and smaller.

Because of this competition, Epstein built large beer warehouses in Kovno and the Suwalki governorate. He built a large beer warehouse in Vilkovishki, Suwalki governorate.

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There he appointed two capable young people who would be able to lead the competition.

One of them, Levental, a young man, an expert, was characterized by his sharp perception, and the other, Norman, was simply a cheerful, pleasant person and a joker.

I often went to Vilkovishki and helped the two young people in their "dangerous" competition. If I ever had a happy and carefree time, it was certainly in Vilkovishki. It was a beautiful, rich border town with very pleasant people.

We fought a "fierce" battle, but at the same time we never forgot ourselves. We lived well and laughed a lot.

But Levental didn't stop at beer. A letter from Philadelphia containing a thousand rubles changed the course of Levental's life. The letter said that his father-in-law, Elazar Dayan, who was a rabbi in Philadelphia, had died. And he, Levental, had been chosen as rabbi, meaning that he was to fill the vacancy.

Levental, who until then had lived in a secular way and did not shy away from our society, immediately devoted himself to the "Choshen Mishpat" [section of a compilation dealing with aspects of Jewish law, including financial matters] and the "Yoreh De'ah" [section of a compilation dealing with aspects of Jewish law not directly related to the Hebrew calendar, finances, compensation, marriage, divorce, etc.] and had a "zupetse" [luxurious coat] sewn from Atlas silk...

He transformed himself from a clerk in a beer store to the rabbi of a large Jewish community in Philadelphia.

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He is still highly respected by the Jewish population there. He is even the chairman of the Agudas Harabonim [Union of Orthodox Rabbis] in America.

When Levental left the beer business, the competition between me and Norman continued. It must be admitted that we both did a very good job, because after a short time the two rich gentlemen, Volf and Soloveytshik, had to sell the well-known beer company "Shopen" to Epstein [1] ...

After the purchase, Epstein continued to operate his brewery at "Ruzele" [Ruslelia Station/Vilna?] Anyway, Vilna now had no more than two beer companies: "Shopen" and "Lipski".
Both companies had finally merged, and the competition had burst like a soap bubble.

At that time we, a number of partners working in the beer industry, took over the sale of beer from all three factories in all regions. All the wagons loaded with beer that were transported by rail in different directions were under our management and supervision. Needless to say, this completely changed my situation.
My income increased day by day, and the time came when the sun was shining even in my humble little corner...

I must admit that the merger of the beer companies was very loyal and honest to me. The calculation was simple: as long as the brewery merger existed, so did we, and therefore we were interested in its safe survival.

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R' Mordechai Epstein, who apparently could not be satisfied with his wealth, finally realized that he had miscalculated with the merger. He found that he would have done much better if he had not merged with Lipski. I think his assessment was wrong. But he thought that way, and when R' Mordechai Epstein thought that way, he wanted to implement [the conclusion] immediately.

He wanted to tear up the merger, to cancel the agreement. But how could he do that when there was no opportunity? But his sharp mind found a way out. He sent for a friend, a "Homler" [2] beer wholesaler, and talked it over with him.

R' Mordechai Epstein told him:
"I haven't liked our merger for a long time. It has harmed me. However, I cannot simply escape from it because I cannot find a sufficient reason to do so. But you can help me. Just take one wagon of beer from me [for sale], which means I've broken the agreement. This will put an end to this disgusting merger..."

According to the agreement, you could not take just one wagon from a single beer company. The Homler wholesaler told R' Mordechai that he would consult with someone and came to me. He had Shabbat dinner with me and stayed the night.

On Sunday morning he said to me:
"Listen to my story, R' Meir.

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R' Mordechai Epstein suggests to me that I should take only one wagon of beer from his company in order to break up the merger... But I thought about it: I have a wife and children, and I can't get involved in such adventures... Lipski will break my neck with his competition afterwards... What do you think, R' Meir? It's none of my business, is it?"

"It is indeed none of your business," I replied, "R' Mordechai Epstein does not appreciate the value of the merger as it should be. It has put an end to the wild, harmful competition and given the breweries the opportunity to exist with profits and not with deficits, as was the case during the competition".

The Homler wholesaler followed me. He listened to my words and took beer from all three wagons.
One Shabbat, R' Mordechai invited this Homler wholesaler to lunch. But he replied:
"Thank you, R' Mordechai, but I have already promised Pisiuk that I will come to his house for lunch on Shabbat."
"Pisiuk of all people?" R' Mordechai was very surprised, "what can you eat at his house?"
"What do you mean?" the wholesaler babbled, "his Shabbat meals are of a high standard: with chickens, ducks, all the delicacies in the world..."

R' Mordechai sat as if petrified. He only ever saw me in bad clothes (you always had to present yourself to him in such clothes), and he just couldn't understand that I could afford to have a decent Shabbat.

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Unfortunately for him, he didn't know that I already had quite a bit of money in the bank...

The brewers' merger lasted another three years before it was dissolved. We, the people of the well-organized beer trade, had played a big part in its survival.

[1] This probably took place in 1897, see also "Epstein's Brewery", its Fate in Vilnius – Beer Et Seq

[2] He came from Homel or Gomel, today the second largest city in Belarus

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Chapter XXII

The sufferings of a "double man". - Nicholas II and his manifesto. - I want to be ME. - R' Lipe. - The "Musernikes" and the "Maskilim". - R' Yuzl. - R' Lipe's advice. - On the eve of Yom Kippur to the draft. - A fellow sufferer. - In Novogrodok. - Before the military commission. - I am taken for a "malekh". - A hurried trip to Lyubtsh. - The Kol Nidre night in Lyubtsh. - Yom Kippur - memories. - With the police commissioner. - An encounter with Velvele the tailor. - The town informers. - The power of insolence. - Fainting. - Meir, what's wrong with you? - My Ne'ila prayer and my mistake. - A truly memorable day.

Meanwhile, time was slipping away. I was already a father of four. I had a considerable amount of money in the bank, and I still presented myself to the world under the strange name of Meir Shleymovitsh Buris...

But how much longer was I going to carry this strange name? Sometimes I was almost confused and asked myself:
"Who am I? Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk or Meir Shleymovitsh Buris?"
I walked around as a person with two names, a "double man," with a double life, a mystery, a secret...

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In the end, I had to stick to one name forever - my name. In this case, for once, "less" was much more important than "more"-better one name than two.

In the manifesto that Nicholas II had issued when he took the Russian throne [1894], there was a certain decree for those who had not enlisted, like me, for example. That manifesto said that those who had not enlisted for various reasons would not be punished.
But now, after the manifesto was published, they were supposed to register for military service.

Of course, after the manifesto, it was the right time to change back to my own name. The decree made it easier. Thinking nothing of it, I went to my dear shtetl Lyubtsh, and R' Lipe, the head of the village, a tall, clever, and well-behaved Jew, took me in as his good guest.
But R' Lipe was also a Jewish scholar, and his living room was filled with the sounds and activities of the Torah.

When I visited him on Shabbat, many young men and Talmud scholars sat at his table. They belonged to the " Muser" yeshivah [1] , which was led by the well-known " Musernik" [2] R' Yuzl.

R' Yuzl actually led two yeshivahs, one in Novogrodok and the other in Lyubtsh. About forty young people studied in both yeshivahs.

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They devoted themselves primarily to the "muser-sforim" [3] according to the school of R' Israel Salanter.
R' Yuzl himself, however, had temporarily distanced himself from the yeshivahs because he was practicing "hisboydedes" [seclusion for meditative experience] in a forest near the Novoyelne train station...

I sat down at R' Lipe's table and asked the young people to read me some of the "sedre" [one of the 54 weekly portions of the Torah]. I noticed that there were "Maskilim" [4] among them.

In the words of the "Musernikes" I felt something like a dark fire of fanaticism, while the "Maskilim" interpreted a part of the "Sedre" simply, clearly and understandably - with an allusion to modern times...

At the table sat [representatives of] two [religious-ethical] schools of thought, fighting each other. But at that time, the battle was still hidden, probably mainly because the Maskilim more or less kept a low profile.

Later I spoke with R' Lipe about my concerns. R' Lipe was not one of those innumerable "starostes" [mayors] who made a mockery of the law. He himself was not a dry pedant or a formalist, but he insisted that everything done in such matters should have a legal character. He said: "Why take the crooked road when you can take the straight road? You have to get a form from the Novogrodker military commission if you want to enlist in the army.

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You didn't do it in time because you were in America at the time. But to speed things up and make them easier, you need to 'grease' them a little with a hundred rubles. After that, everything will be in perfect order".

I could always trust R' Lipe. His honesty and reliability were the best guarantee. It was not for nothing that he was the best and most honest of the "starostes".

Of course, I did exactly as R' Lipe had advised me. Exactly on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, I received a "povyestke" [summons] from the Novogrodker military commission, telling me to come to the commission on the eve of Yom Kippur to enlist!

I must admit that this "povyestke" threw me a bit. Immediately the taste of military service, of barracks, of cloaks came up.

My wife looked at me in silence and I looked at her in silence. Now the decisive moment had come for the "double man", the man who had two names - Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk and Meir Shleymovitsh Buris - to change back into a single person. Namely, the real, genuine, unadulterated Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk...

But I was very offended and embarrassed that it was the day of Yom Kippur.

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It was as if the Russian Tsar had deliberately chosen this day to annoy me. Let the Jew suffer, let the Jew have heartache!

But I had no other choice, and we both, my wife and I, went to Novogrodok, where I had to report to the military commission for the "Yom Hadin" [Day of Judgment].

On the way, I met a fellow sufferer, a young man from a neighboring shtetl, who was going to the same "Yom Hadin" as I was. He was also a "double person" and wanted to throw off his foreign name like a heavy burden.

We arrived in Novogrodok early in the morning and went to a small hotel. Needless to say, a relative and a friend immediately appeared with advice and comforting words.

But we felt depressed. We walked around as if our hearts were wounded. We had no appetite. We didn't want to eat or drink, and our hands were limp. I even went to an ophthalmologist who told me that my nearsightedness could exempt me from military service.

But as my brother used to say:
"I never saw a short-sighted Jew make a mistake counting money because of his short-sightedness..."
And was the Russian Tsar really such an expert on nearsightedness?
As long as your heart was reasonably healthy, that was all you needed.
"Godyen!" [Good enough!], and that was it.

Meanwhile, time was running out, the clock hand kept turning.

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Trying not to feel like a dead man, I clenched my teeth and went with my fellow sufferer to the military commission.

There, excuse me, we undressed and took off all our clothes. Then they called us, took us under the ruler, measured us, weighed us, examined us. I complained about my eyes.

"We'll see about that later," the military commission chairman said. "You'll have to show me a certificate that it's really you and not a fake. We don't know if you are really Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk and not someone else."

I took out of my jacket a document issued by the city magistrate and testified that I was Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk.

But this document was not accepted by the military commission. They thought that we were "interchanges" or even "malokhim" [angels], as they called them, because we wore glasses...
As is well known, the "malokhim" presented themselves to the military commission on behalf of other conscripts. They were usually exempted from military service because of their disabilities.
Of course, the "exemption certificate" was then given - in exchange for a certain amount of money - to those who actually had to enlist. And so they were exempted from military service.

It was a simple and easy way, as long as no "mosrim" [informers] were involved.

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The chairman of the military commission ordered that we be arrested and sent to Lyubtsh, where it would be determined whether we were the people named in the document.
We didn't like this at all. It kept ringing in our ears:
"Yom Kippur!...Yom Kippur!"

But it didn't help, we were arrested and could only do what we were told.

It was only with great difficulty that we were at least sent directly to Lyubtsh. Yom Kippur was fast approaching.

We hired two light carts. My wife sat in one with a sergeant, and I sat in the second with my fellow-sufferer. The horses were well whipped from the start, and they carried us like devils to Lyubtsh...

The sun was already setting, and when we arrived in Lyubtsh it was almost night. The bote-midroshim [houses of prayer and study] and synagogues were full of people praying. In the windows you could see the large wax candles that bathed the shaking Jews in their white coats in yellow light.

The streets were empty and deserted. Outside, the Yom Kippur candles in the houses gave off a trembling glow. Anxious voices from the bote-midroshim, synagogues and minyanim filled the air...

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Somewhere in a small synagogue, a prayer leader began the "Kol Nidre" [5] , and I felt my childhood in his old Jewish sounds, coming from the depths of his heart:
"Ay-Ay-Ay...ay-ay-ay...ay-ay-ay..."
Before my eyes rose my father, my mother, my home, the rebeyem [rabbis]. They were all shrouded in a delicate mist that touched my heart and brought tears to my eyes.
"din-dar-na...[that we have sworn]...ay-ay-ay-ay-ay-ay...u-d'eeshta-ba- na-a-a-a [and sworn]..."

My memories are deeply moving, and the Yom Kippur sounds from the synagogues take hold of me completely, but the sergeant with his badge keeps reminding me that we are under arrest and that it has to be established who we really are.

He leads us inside to the police commissioner's office - the right place to hear "Kol-Nidre"... However, "Akhinu bney Yisroel" [our brothers, the children of Israel] immediately realized that two arrested Jews had been brought to the shtetl. The news spread like wildfire from synagogue to synagogue, for a Jew always felt great compassion for an arrested Jew, especially at a time like Yom Kippur.

The fine "balebatim" [family heads or proprietors] of the town put away their holiday prayer books for a while and ran to the police commissioner. They scolded him a lot. But he insisted that we be released on bail. He demanded six hundred roubles.

My wife even had some money with her. But she was afraid to show it.

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"Thank God" the old informers still lived in the shtetl (every shtetl had its informers), and if they had only smelled that we had money, they would have had us on a leash and we would never have been able to buy our freedom from them.

Despite the Yom Kippur night, a number of "balebatim" ran home to get the money, and one even brought a "vyaygrishni bilet" [winning lottery ticket]... The mitzvah of "pidyen-shvuim" [ransoming Jewish prisoners] is known to exceed the mitzvah of praying, even on the night of Yom Kippur.

The police commissioner got the six hundred rubles and released us.

We went straight to the synagogue, where they were in the middle of Mayriv [evening prayers], and we joined in the prayers. Yes, at that time we davened with all our hearts and didn't even spare our tears...

The next day was difficult. All the "turmoil" had made me very weak, three things had come together: Yom Kippur, fasting [6] and military service. The synagogue and the police. The bail and the Jews in white robes [7].

During the Musef prayer, I had an argument with Velvele the tailor. He was a well-known informer in the shtetl. In principle he was a very good tailor, but he was always spying on the affairs of the Jewish community, poking his nose into everything, sniffing, feeling, searching, rummaging, and if he came across something forbidden, he would immediately jump up with threats and demand money.

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I don't know if he was a real informer, but if you didn't give him what he wanted, he threatened to report you to the authorities and wipe you out.

He also had a friend, Khayim the shoemaker. He was also constantly snooping around and spying on others. He wasn't quite as bad as Velvele the tailor, but he could also bully people. Both of them ruled the shtetl in a strangely brazen manner, and the helpless inhabitants were truly afraid of them.

"Khutspe" [impudence] is a big thing, and in a remote shtetl its effect is a thousand times stronger and more dangerous than in a big city.

The two people mentioned actually acted with impudence, not with denunciation. They put a gun to someone's chest and pressed and squeezed as hard as they could.
This is the Velvele I met during the "Musef". Tall and stiff, he approached me like a bogeyman, and suddenly spoke to me with the utmost insolence and audacity of which only an irresponsible man is capable:
"Ah, R' Meir, there you are! We know you've been avoiding military service! We know you! We've been watching you for a long time! You're going to suffer a lot with us... We'll show you what happens when you shirk your duty to serve the Tsar... You won't forget us!

What could I say to him?
I just yelled "bully!" and immediately felt my legs give out.

I barely managed to drag myself to my relative's house, fell inside and immediately passed out...

They started to wake me up. I opened my eyes and asked for water. I felt my strength leaving me from thirst. I was given water and I drank, drank, drank...

My relative almost fainted from shock.
"Meir, what's wrong with you?" she cried. "The Guardian of Israel [God] is with you! Today is Yom Kippur!"

Unfortunately, the poor woman didn't know that "pikuech-nefesh" [protecting and saving a soul] is more important than "doykhe-shabes un yom-kiper" [observing Shabbat and Yom Kippur].

Later, I returned to the bes-medresh, where our familiar cantor, R' Meir the Hoarse, was gargling vigorously by sticking his thumb down his throat, as was his custom. He emitted such twisted, elaborate trills that it made your head spin.

At the Ne'ila prayer [8] , the "gaboim" (charity supervisors) surrounded me and asked me to recite the Ne'ila before the congregation.
"We have heard," they said, "that you are such a good prayer leader. You must go to the omed [podium]!"

Although I was so weak and depressed, I couldn't refuse. I went to the podium.

I pulled the tallis over my head and declaimed a Ne'ila that the congregation found extraordinary. Only once was I wrong.
One must end it solemnly:
יימקדש השבת ויום הכפורים!יי
[(He) sanctifies Shabbat and Yom Kippur!] [9]

But I shouted loudly and with great triumph:
יימקדש השבת ויום הזכרון!יי
[(He) sanctifies Shabbat and Memorial Day!]

That was truly a day that was etched in my memory for the rest of my life.

The journey from Vilna to Novogrodok, the hotel, the military commission, having to strip naked in front of unfriendly strangers, the ride in the horse-drawn carriage from Novogrodok to Lyubtsh - under the supervision of a sergeant, the police commissioner demanding bail, the night of Kol Nidre, the depression, and Velvele's insolence - all this cannot be forgotten.

[1] Muser= moralistic religious movement with its own associations and schools, which had developed in Lithuania and Poland under Rabbi Israel Salanter in 1842

[2] Moralist, follower or disciple of the ethical “muser” movement

[3] popular edification books, especially for women and ordinary people

[4] Maskilim= Jewish enlighteners and educated people

[5] כל-נידרי= Kol Nidre or Kol Nidrei ["All Vows"], first prayer on the night of Yom Kippur, asking for the release of all vows made to God, whether recklessly or under duress.
Please read more here Text of Kol Nidrei Prayer - Chabad.org or listen to it here [2:15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpwwcS-rfoE The author describes here the typical vocal ornamentation of the precentor on certain syllables, which is especially typical in the Chassidic tradition.

[6] There are five prohibitions on Yom Kippur: for example, eating, drinking, amusements

[7] On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, white garments or coats are traditionally worn over clothing, resembling innocent, pure angels, but also the garments of the dead. They also remind people of their own mortality and remind them to repent.

[8] The Ne'ila or Neilah prayer is the last prayer on Yom Kippur and its emotional climax. It is recited festively and powerfully shortly before sunset, before the gates of heaven symbolically close.

[9] This line, "Mekadesh HaShabbat ve'HaKippurim," is the last of several blessings in the Ne'ila prayer. It reminds the person praying that the special holiness of the weekly Sabbath and the annual Yom Kippur comes from God, and strengthens the sense of awe.

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Chapter IIIXX

An infestation of the "mosrim". - My relative's warning. - "Na ispitanye". - The Dzetler Rabbi and his "khiberl". - Will we really eat and drink in the "oylem-hoemes"? - In the military hospital. - The "dyatke" in my dream. - My shortsightedness saves me after all. - Farewell to Meir Shleymovitsh Buris. - My beer business. - The two categories. - Nachumzon again. - Life and its artistic confusion. - The change in my house. - The dear company of books. - The "Shas". - The Tanakh. - Bialik. - Frishman.- Fainting.- The "Zeyde". - Peretz.- Sholem-Aleykhem.- My bookshelves.

The next day we went to the police commissioner. When he saw that the "detainees" had not fled, but had even turned themselves in, he returned the six hundred ruble bail.

My old rabbi, R' Yisroel-Aharon, a very credible Jew, confirmed to the police commissioner that I was indeed Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk. My fellow sufferer also found a Lyubtsher "balebos" who "confirmed his personality" before the police commissioner.

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We were sent back to Novogrodok under the almighty supervision of the sergeant. While we were being processed at the police commissioner's office, the two informers, Velvele the tailor and Khayim the shoemaker, were hanging around us. They threatened us, warned us, insulted us, and clung to us like thieves in the forest.

"We'll show you what it's like to avoid military service and not serve... we'll fleece you wherever we can... we'll give you hell on earth until you can do no more[1] ..."

These words stabbed us like hot needles. My first thought was to give them a beating, but when you're shaking, it's hard to hit them... I would have preferred to put a coin in their hands so that I wouldn't have to see their faces again, but my relative from Lyubtsh stopped me.

"God forbid!" he said fiercely. "You don't know these people. As soon as you give them a little, they'll cling to you and suck all your blood...They're bloodsuckers, 'pyavkes' [leeches]...they won't let you go."

I took courage and gave them nothing. And it was the right thing to do.

The Novogrodok military commission handed me over to "na ispitanye," that is, for medical examination.

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And we went safely to Vilna. Understandably, this "na ispitanye" cost several hundred rubles (R' Lipe had reckoned on "a hundred"). You couldn't do anything in the Tsarist regime without money. That was a well-known rule.

I remember a little anecdote from the trip from Novogrodok to Vilna. In the wagon I met the Dzetler [Dzjatlava] Rabbi, who gave me his "khiberl" [book], "עולם התחיה" [The World of the Resurrection], which he had had printed not long ago. In this book he shows, based on various sources, that the world of the hereafter is actually composed of pure "gashmiyes" [physicality, material matter].
In the world beyond, one will eat the "shorhaber" [legendary ox] and the "levyosn" [legendary sea monster], and one will drink the "yain-hamshumer" [legendary wine] in great luxury, and it will be joyful...

The "RaMBaM" [Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon or Moses Maimonides], however, as is well known, shows exactly the opposite, namely that the hereafter is only "rukhniyes", purely spiritual. In the "true world" [afterlife] there would be no food and no drink...

I had to laugh very hard and said to the Dzetler Rabbi: "Rebbe, what will it be like, for example, when we come to the other world and there will be neither this nor that, neither material nor spiritual, neither what the RaMBaM means nor what you mean?

The Rabbi smiled and said:

"You know, we'll make a kind of bet. You paid me forty kopecks for my book. Well, let that be our wager.

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As soon as you are convinced, after one hundred and twenty years, that it is not the way I wrote it, give me back my book and I will give you back the forty kopecks..."

Since, thank God, I was already halfway through the draft, I laughed out loud with all my heart, and the Dzetler Rabbi also smiled good-naturedly into his beard...

Having to wait a little longer for the medical examination, I happily celebrated the first days of Sukkot with a "suke" [leaf hut], with a fine etrog, with an excellent "lulev" [palm branch] and with all the other things that belong to Sukkot. Then I went to Antokolye, a suburb of Vilna, where the military hospital was located.

That hospital had very heavy doors. It was even easy to get in, but to get out you needed enough compassion...

And the most important thing - there was no one to bribe. The head doctor was very strict and apparently a very decent person, at least because bribery was not tolerated there. The first thing they did in the hospital was to make me a soldier, at least on the outside. I was given a

rough soldier's shirt, rough trousers worn on a cord, and a gray "shinel" [cloak]. The treatment was quite decent.

The first night, of course, I slept very badly on the hard straw mattress.

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Additionally, I dreamed that I had been accepted as a Jew, taken to a large, barren barrack and handed over to the well-known "dyadke" [2] , who had to teach me service and gymnastics. He was a peasant with a short, haughty nose, a broad face like a plank, covered with scars and pustules from smallpox. Short, hard hair stood out from his head like a brush...

He began to lecture me, shouting, foaming at the mouth, fists outstretched. Then he began to shower me with real Tsarist "mishebeyrekhs" [imprecations]. His white eyes twisted like wheels, and his face swelled like a barrel, spewing red sparks. I was frightened to death and screamed in panic, "Help!...help!...help!"

Someone grabbed my arm. I opened my eyes. The "dezhur" [night guard] soldier was standing next to me. He woke me [from my dream] and asked:
"What are you yelling about? A hospital is not a forest!"
Only then did I realize that I was only in the hospital for a check-up and that the short-nosed "dyadke" was still far away.

The next morning, the head doctor came in and ordered me to be examined immediately. I was taken to the ophthalmologist's office. The doctor and his assistants worked on me for a whole hour.

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They put drops in my eyes, tortured me with this and that, and finally the doctor said angrily, as if I had stepped on his corn:
"Ti, Pisiuk, nye godyen k voyeney sluzhbe" (You, Pisiuk, are not fit for military service!).

Well, that's what I wanted. Lord of the world, please don't let me hear worse news all my life, even if it's delivered with such malice as the doctor did.
I was sent back to the ophthalmology department, and after a few days I was taken to the chief ophthalmologist, who, after a brief examination, also decided that I was unfit for military service with such short-sightedness.

Everything ended in peace. There was only one small thing left: I had to be sent back to Novogrodok in a convoy of prisoners (always the same story: maybe I was a "malekh" anyway), where the military commission would issue me a certificate and a passport in my name, and I would escape the confusion.

This grief, too, was finally resolved. I was no longer a "double person". I was traveling under my own name again. What a joy that was! I felt like a new person! I have nothing against the name Meir Shleymovitsh Buris.

In fact, so far he has served me very well and honestly. He walked hand in hand with me and never betrayed me.

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But one day we had to separate. Our life together had become too dangerous. We were even separated by a serious operation - first in Novogrodok and then in Antokolye. But we didn't part as enemies, but as really good friends...

Later I moved to a new apartment. I registered my name as Meir Movshovitsh Pisiuk, while Meir Shleymovitsh Buris remained in the old apartment. That is, his name remained on the books of the police station on whose border my old apartment was located...

***

After all that, I went back to my exciting beer business, which wasn't going badly.

I've said before that the person who takes an interest-bearing loan is always more likeable and more human than the person who gives an interest-bearing loan.
Once my money had grown, I naturally had to fall into the second category.

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That is, to those who give interest-bearing loans...

And my fate actually wanted Nachumzon, the good, dear Jew who didn't want me to be his son-in-law, to come to me to discount bills [3] ...

Ah, life is always more fantastic and intricate than the most expansive human imagination. We cannot even imagine such ingenious combinations, such wonderful coincidences, confusions, twists, knots and connections that life - that great master and author of all kinds of fantasies - puts before our eyes every day.

Of course, I took Nachumzon well and never let him feel that life had played a trick on our mutual relationship...
On the other hand, I still don't know if Nachumzon was that greedy. No, he wasn't the kind of person who could be blinded by money. And when he came to me to discount bills, we both smiled good-naturedly at each other, and that was the end of the matter.

All he said was:
"Meir, I see that your business is growing and you are making money."
And I replied:
"I think you have to make money while you can..."

Already my house looked different:

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There were shelves (with glass doors) of books - Jewish and religious books. It's a great pleasure and I always love to see these shelves multiply and the number of my books grow. They take me to other worlds. They take me out of the gross world of physical things - away from purely material interests. ....

By the way, it's happier with them in the house. Like good friends, they wave to me from afar, smiling and reassuring me.

There is the large "Shas" [abbreviation, six sections of the Mishnah and Talmud]. Its heavy volumes give the impression of a secure foundation. They do not allow my weak human mind to waver, but show it the way. With great firmness and certainty they say to him:

"This is good. Do this. And this is bad, don't do that."
And I know and feel with all my senses that they are never wrong.

And there the sweetest, dearest and most intimate book in the whole world, the book of all books, flashes out at me from the shelf: The Tanakh, which gives me so much imagination, history, beauty, simplicity, justice and righteousness.

And a little further on, the series continues with colorful volumes of modern Hebrew literature. I look at them and hear from afar [Chaim Nachman] Bialik's powerful prophetic word, [David] Frishman's acumen and irony...

And there is even the "zeyde" [grandfather] [4] with his old lame horse, with his miserable "Fishke" [Fishke the Lame], with his broadly painted pictures which, when you look at them, reveal the whole world of your childhood. It frightens you, but at the same time it attracts you.

And there is [Isaac Leib] Peretz, with his sparse, meager words, with his flashing thoughts, with his sharp image that will forever be imprinted on your memory. You will never get rid of it. You would think that Peretz himself is so ephemeral, so quick and hasty, but the impression that remains of his books is stored forever, stable, lasting, like a resident in your soul...

And there is Sholem-Aleichem again, with all his skills. Oh, Sholem-Aleichem! It's no longer just a matter of an impression, of a great effect. It's all about love...

The "zeyde" can sometimes upset me. His picture can sometimes put me in a bad mood. Peretz can sting me. Sometimes he frightens me. But I love Sholem-Aleichem. My approach to him is like to a good brother, to my relative. ....
I read him and I am never afraid of him. And everything he writes makes me feel a bit like a partner, as if I were sitting at his desk with him...

That's probably because I always see him in his books, and I always see myself reflected in them. I see both of us at the same time. We are both characters in them. And that's how I explain my real, true love as a reader for this great, incomparable Jewish writer.

And there, like soldiers, are the cold, sober volumes of an encyclopedia, and there, in a corner, the great "Graetz" [5] nestles so modestly...

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I have to say again and again that it is good and pleasant to live in the company of these tall and short, thin and fat, light and heavy volumes (as well as people of different sizes). They smile at me from the glass doors of the shelves with their meaningful smiles...

[1] very free translation.

[2] dyadke= from Russian, something like “uncle” but also a nickname for an older, experienced man with a mentoring or supervisory function.

[3] To discount bills of exchange = to purchase bills of exchange before they mature, deducting interest.

[4] He is referring to Mendele Moykher-Sforim, who was also called the “grandfather” of Yiddish literature.

[5] Heinrich Graetz wrote the standard work of 19th-century historiography from a Jewish perspective.

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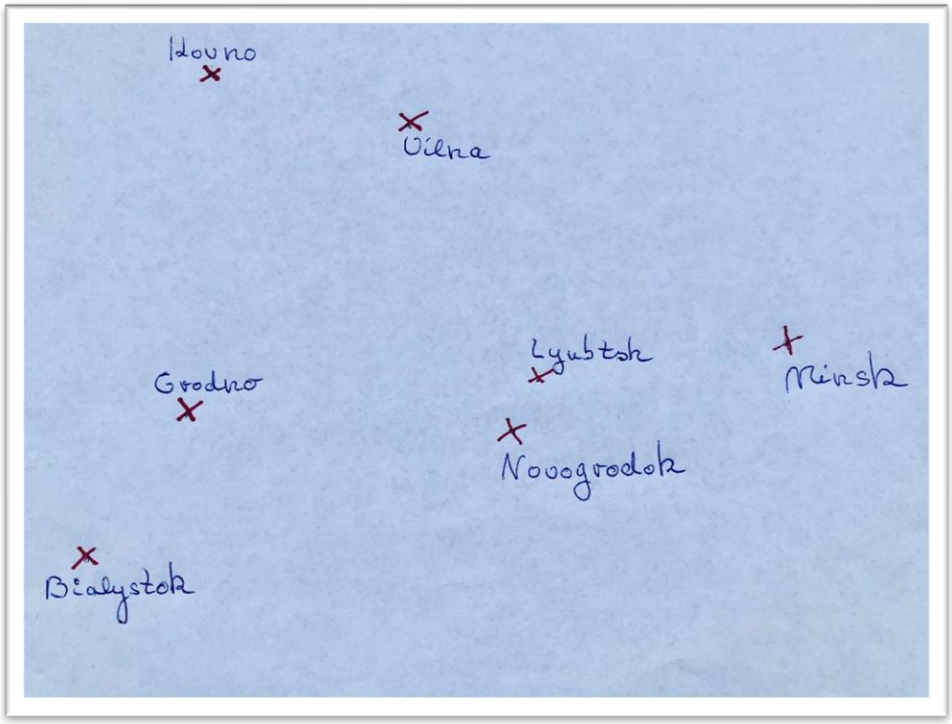

A drawing made by the translator to give an idea of how the cities mentioned were located in relation to each other.

Lyubtsh, Market Place, 1901-1914, courtesy of Dr. Tomasz Wisniewski

Translator's Epilogue:

The author Meir [Movshovitsh] Pisiuk or Meir-Hertz Pisiuk, or Meir Moshe Herz Pisiuk, was born in 1865 or 1867 in Lyubtsh and died in 1941 or 1942 in Los Angeles [1].

His childhood and youth were marked by turbulence. The many ups and downs of life, which continued later in a period of socio-political upheaval which included two world wars and culminated in the great Jewish catastrophe, the Shoah.

The author wrote a total of 5 volumes of his biographical "Bleter Zikhroynes".

Without having read the other four volumes, readers can gain important insights into the history of M. Pisiuk from the "Testimonies of the Pisiuk and Strick Families" [1] [a collection of photographs, documents and biographical descriptions] and from the extensive references in the Yizkor Book of Rovno [1], [2].

M. Pisiuk later seems to have followed in his father's footsteps and was active in both religious and commercial spheres. He, the Jewish scholar, became a respected rabbi and great benefactor of the town of Rovno [the largest Jewish community in Volhynia] and a committed Zionist. His wife Shulamit, who supported him warmly and actively, was always faithfully at his side.

Thanks to their family cohesion and business skills, the family was able to achieve some prosperity. After winning the lottery, Meir and his wife Shulamit acquired what was to

become Poland's largest brewery and a joint stock company with the Hebrew name "ברגשלוס" [German: Bergschloss, Polish: Bergszlos]. This included a factory for the production of yeast.

Meir and Shulamit had at least three children.

The eldest son was *Aryeh (Lova) Leyb*, who studied mechanical engineering in Kiev. A future Bundist, he was a dedicated public activist, focusing on humanitarian issues. His daughter Frida Degani, née Pisiuk, gives a detailed account of her family in the "Testimonies" [1] . Her brother, Nehemia, is lovingly mentioned by Amos Oz [3] .

Their daughter *Rachel*, married to Strick, had three children of whom, tragically, only daughter Yehudit [Dita, Judith] survived the Shoah. She wrote the important autobiographical books "A Girl Called Judith Strick" [4] and "And Some Shall Live".

The Pisiuk's youngest son, *Shmuel* (Samuel), should not go unmentioned here. We learn more about him in the Yizkor Book of Rovno, Rivne, Ukraine - Pages 362-392, pages 388 - 390.

Mr and Mrs Pisiuk emigrated to Israel in 1934 and were involved in a wide range of social activities until the end of their lives.

[1] Meir was born in 1867 according to רובנה מש' פיסיוק ושטריק עדויות | גולה ותקומה [Testimonies of the Families Pisiuk and Strick, Rovno] and 1865 according to Sefer Zikaron, the Yizkor Book of Rovno [Rivne] Rovneh : sefer zikaron | Yiddish Book Center.

In this context, I would like to point out that the "Hertz-Meir Fisyuk" in the English translation of the Hebrew original, see Rivne, Ukraine - Pages 458-487 [pages 461-462], is actually Hertz-Meir Pisiuk, who was born not in "Lubavitsh (Pinsk region)" but, according to the Hebrew original, in Lyubtsh (Minsk region).

The year of his death is also given differently, as 1941 or 1942. He is said to have died during a visit to Los Angeles.

[2] For further reading I recommend the Yizkor Book of Rovno [Rivne], Rivne, Ukraine, where Hertz-Meir Pisiuk, his wife or Shmuel Pisiuk are mentioned on the following pages: 370, 372, 375, 381,385, 386, 388, 389, 390, 391.

[3] see A Tale of Love and Darkness Page 20 Read online free by Amos Oz

[4] see A girl called Judith Strick : Dribben, Judith Strick : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive

Beate Schützmann-Krebs